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RANCH ROMANCES

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FIRST JUNE NUMBER

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MURDER RANGE by Ray G. Ellis

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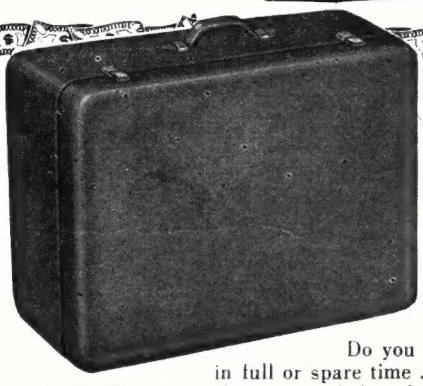

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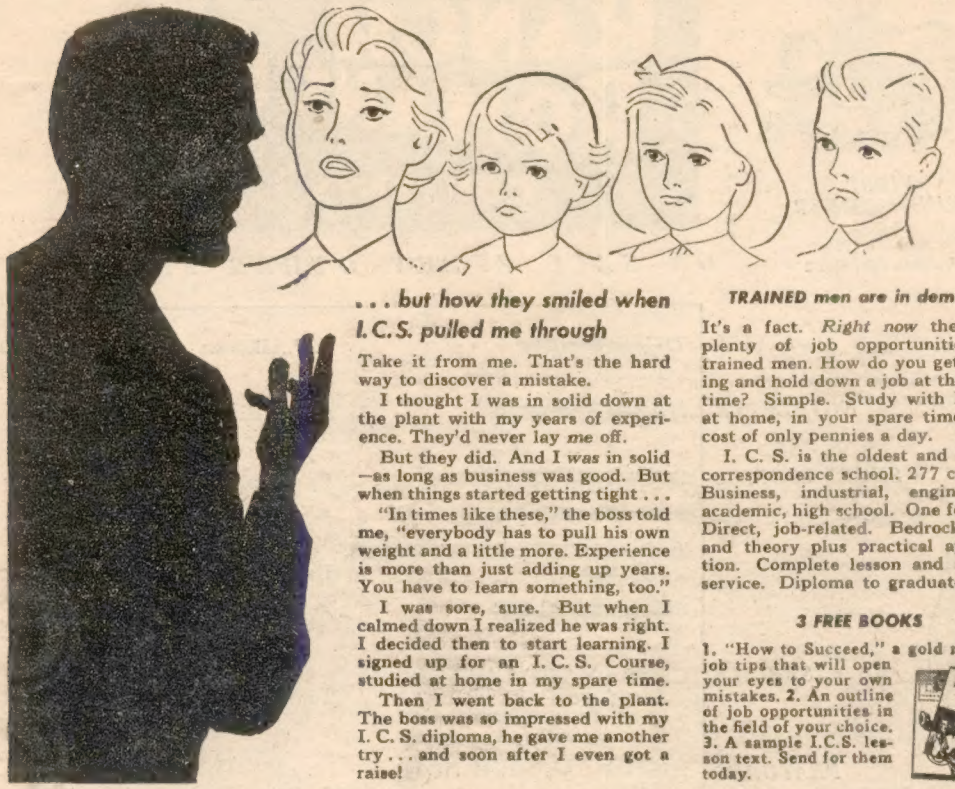

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32nd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST JUNE NUMBER

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Volume 198, No. 3

RANCH ROMANCES

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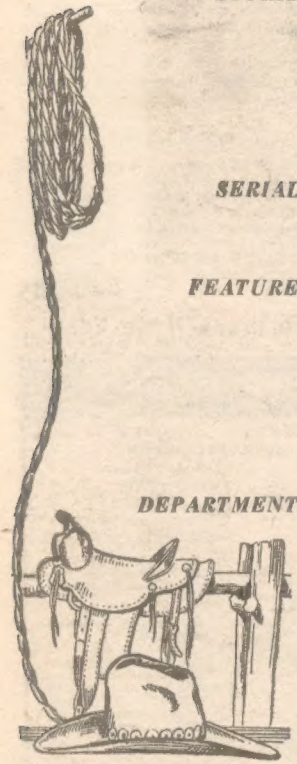

HELEN TONO
Editor

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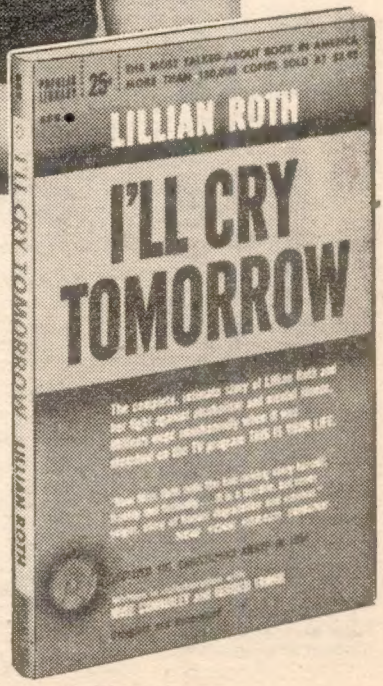
Susan Hayward, star of "I'll Cry Tomorrow"



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A Long Way From Home

Dear Editor:

Won't you please publish my plea for pen pals? I am from the States, but am living down here with my daughter. I am 65 years old. I love to read and write letters. I've been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time, but this is the first time I have written to this column. Would like to hear from people of both sexes who are about my age.

MRS. MYRTLE DAVIS

Creole Petroleum Corporation
Estado Falcon
Lus. Piedras
Venezuela, South America
c/o H. S. Bennett

Wants Male Friends

Dear Editor:

I would like to write to male pen pals if I can. I would like them between the ages of 18 and 20. I am 5' tall, have brown hair and hazel eyes, and am 16 years old. I enjoy all kinds of sports. Hope I'll hear from someone as soon as possible.

MYRNA IRVIN

Dorintosh
Sasketchewan, Canada
Box 13

Truck Driver

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for several years and enjoy it immensely. I am a truck driver, 32 years old, 6'2" tall, with brown eyes and black hair. I enjoy all outdoor sports, including hunting and fishing. So come on, everyone, write to me. I'll answer all letters.

DAVEY WHALIN

507 E. 18th Street
Falls City, Nebraska

Versatile Woman

Dear Editor:

I am 43 years old, weigh 122 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I love music and have written several songs. I also like to go to wrestling matches. Will answer all mail.

EVADINE MILLER

1200 Oakley Street
Evansville, Indiana

Good Friend

Dear Editor:

Here's a plea for a friend of mine who is a lonely person. She likes most sports, and especially baseball and horseback riding, and anything that pertains to the outdoors. Her hobbies vary, as she is handicapped. She is 37 years old, 5'4" tall, weighs 115 lbs., and has dark brown hair and blue eyes. Won't you drop her a line? I'm sure she'll be pleased to hear from you all. Her name and address is:

LILY ABELDT

200 Pearl Street
Denver 3, Colorado

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesale spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Young-In-Heart Bachelor

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate some correspondents and will answer anyone, young or old. I am 62 years old, a bachelor farmer, and am thinking of retiring. Would particularly care to hear from ladies who live in California, Texas and Florida.

PETER C. JENSEN

Box 67
Wanham, Alberta
Canada

Foreign Friend

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of your magazine for some time now, and would like to correspond with some of your female readers. I am 24 years old, 6' tall, and weigh 170 lbs. At present I am serving in the Army here. It is very lonesome, as I seldom get any mail.

W1/2137 PFC. BASIL LUE

48½ Pretoria Road
Whitfield Town P. O.,
Jamaica, B. W. I.

From Another Land

Dear Editor:

I have always enjoyed reading RANCH ROMANCES, and I hope there is space for a girl from the Caribbean. I am 16 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 128 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I enjoy nearly all types of sports. My hobbies are collecting postcards, reading, and going to the movies. I would love to hear from everyone, so please don't hesitate to write to me.

TENESA CHIN

1206 Mountain View Avenue
Vineyard Town, P. O.
Kingston, Jamaica
B. W. I.

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THERE'S one wife in Bell Gardens, Calif., who does just what her husband tells her to—and he sometimes wishes she wouldn't. When he phoned to ask that she bring the family car to give his stalled truck a push, she did it—and didn't realize, till the truck smashed into a parked car, that her husband wasn't in the cab to steer.

THE caller requested the number of a cab company, and the Silsbee, Tex., telephone operator gave it—CA 7-6329. "How," asked the customer timidly, "do you make a capital 7?"

VETERAN policemen won over rookies in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma's battle of the cuspidors. The modern-minded police captain had ordered the spittoons banished, but later rescinded the order when two veteran officers got caught in an embarrassing spot—both were forced to swallow a wadful of tobacco.

AFTER spending a fruitless day looking for Indian arrowheads, a Payson, Ariz., man found one—but it didn't cheer him any. The arrowhead was imbedded in his auto's tire, and the tire was flat.

WHEN a portable welder caught fire in a Mason City, Ia., machine shop, the owner hitched the welder to the rear of his truck and set out to meet the firemen. Seeing the fire engines going down the wrong street, he gave chase. By the time he caught them, the blaze was out.

IT WAS definitely the wrong time for a Muskegon, Mich., man to have an auto accident. A car with three police chiefs was in front of him, and two other cars, also driven by police officers, were behind him. The man hit a wall and was immediately booked for drunken driving.

BEING caught with his dollar sign missing was the embarrassing fix the Roswell, N. Mex., city treasurer found himself in. The new tabulating machine arrived without its most vital symbol, and a rush order for a revised keyboard had to be sent in.

WALKING into the Size and Weights Division of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma's Highway Patrol, the tall, shapely blonde asked that she be measured, so she could put her height and weight on her driver's application. The flurried clerks hastened to explain that they weigh only trucks.

SIDNEY, Nebr.'s police chief got a fan letter, of a sort—an unsigned postcard with the cryptic message, "Drop Dead."

FILING a damage suit against a painter, a Cleveland, O., woman charged that he painted her arms green when she criticized the work he did on her garage.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

JUBAL

Columbia's new Western boasts an outstanding trio of stars, and a dramatic human story set against an action-filled background

SOMETIMES it's hard to believe that the Old West was not entirely inhabited by supermen, black villains, sweet heroines and a few crusty, comical old cowpokes. Actually, though, people were people, then as now, with some good in them and some bad.

If this fact has slipped your mind lately, you'd better go see *Jubal*, Columbia's new Western, which has a trio of well-known male stars and a duo of female newcomers heading its cast. And every one of these characters is a complex, believable person.

The title part of Jubal is played by Glenn Ford, as a cowboy who drifts onto a cattle ranch and into a triangle which turns his best friend into his bitterest enemy. Ernest Borgnine plays that part, and he's as sympathetic and heart-breaking as he was in *Marty*. The third man in this dramatic story is Rod Steiger, who by coincidence was the original *Marty* on TV. In *Jubal* he's a lot less likeable, an outsider to the triangle, who nevertheless helped to create it and who helps bring it to its tragic end.

In every triangle there has to be a woman, of course, and in this one it's Valerie French, playing the rancher's wife, whose discontent makes her eyes rove toward a drifting cowboy. She's one of the newcomers I mentioned. The other is Felicia Farr, as the girl who helps Jubal fight his way back to happiness when his life seems to be in ruins.

The movie was made in its real setting, the Grand Teton country of Wyoming. Two modern guest ranches were used for locations, though both of them had to be aged to look like those of the 1890's. The Diamond G ranch has a real history as a stage station for the Yellowstone Stagecoach line, and it was transformed by the movie company into the old town of Teton. The present dining room on the ranch, a huge hall 70 feet long by 33 feet wide, was made over into the saloon where Ernest and Glenn fight their murderous battle.

As usual when a picture is made on location, local people were used for extras. Most of them are real housewives and cowboys, but a few of the dude ranch guests managed to

get into the act too. In fact, this is doubtless the only film in history with three millionaires in the cast, though you'll have a hard time picking them out of the crowd.

Just about the biggest piece of luck a director could dream of happened to Delmer Daves. The script called for a cattle roundup, and so when he got to the Wyoming location he began asking how a reasonable facsimile of a roundup could be faked for the cameras. Then he learned to his delight that no faking would be necessary. Local ranchers were about to move 1000 head of cattle to new pastures across the Snake River. So the roundup in Jubal is the real thing.

The most exciting moment of that cattle drive never got recorded on film, however. It happened when the cattle were fording the river and some of them panicked. The herd began to stampede, and they headed straight for the script girl, who was on foot and naturally scared to death.

Just in the nick of time, Noah Berry, Jr., spurred his horse right in front of the girl, shielding her and forcing the cattle to gallop around them both.

Noah wasn't the only one to show his horsemanship. Glenn, to the astonishment of the real cowboys in those parts, did all his own riding in the film, including one scene on the hurricane deck of an outlaw. He added to his reputation by doing some bulldogging, too, and when the picture was finished the local ranchers and cowboys presented him with a trophy naming him the best rough rider in the movies. Glenn looked just about as pleased as it he'd won an Oscar.

He confided in me later that there was one good reason for his riding ability and his interest in rodeo stunts. He'd been taught by Will Rogers himself, when Glenn was a stable boy on Will's ranch in Santa Monica, years ago.

The only injury during the filming was minor and rather ridiculous. Glenn and Felicia were playing a love scene, when she suddenly screamed, "You're on fire."

He was, too. A partly smoked cigar he thought had gone out was smouldering away in his pocket. When the fire was out he grinned at Felicia and said, "Wow! That was really a hot love scene."

Valerie French intervenes between Ernest Borgnine and Glenn Ford

FRANK SINATRA
He'll Try Anything

RANCH FLICKER TALK

ONE THING you can say about Frank Sinatra—he's willing to try anything. He had to fight for the part in *From Here to Eternity,* in which he proved that he could act as well as sing and make bobbysoxers squeal. Ever since then Frankie's career has been just about the hottest in Hollywood. He goes from drama *(The Man With the Golden Arm)* to song and dance *(Guys and Dolls)* with the greatest of ease, and right now he's making a Western, *Johnny Concho,* to be released by United Artists later this year.

"I've never played in a Western," said Frank, "but I've always wanted to. Only nobody offered me a part. Finally I offered one to myself."

What he meant by that was that his own company, Kent Productions, is making *Johnny Concho,* so Frank has even more than his usual drive toward making it a success.

That tremendous drive of his is no secret. All the world knows how he fought his way up from a New Jersey slum to reign supreme in the hearts of teen-agers during the '40's. That success wasn't enough for him, though. From there he became a musical comedy star, then an Academy Award winning actor, and now a producer.

You might wonder what new worlds he'll find to conquer next, but don't worry—he'll think of something. He'll never, never sit still.

Quite literally, he can't sit still. He'll flop into a chair exhausted, but in a second he's tapping his foot and darting quick glances around as if he's afraid he's missing something. He sips coffee constantly, "like a bird at a bird bath," said one observer.

There's a deep earnestness to him, no matter what he's doing, but it's most obvious when he's working. For instance, there's a scene in *Johnny Concho* where he uses a special trick holster with a spring in it that pops the gun into his hand.

Frank was obviously worried as he strapped the thing around him. He looked down at it suspiciously. "Gosh," he said nervously, before he'd even tried it, "what'll we do if it doesn't work?"

Someone sensibly suggested that he rehearse the scene to see if it *did* work. In the story, the sheriff tells Johnny about the trick holster.

"You'll be able to outdraw the speediest gunfighter," says the sheriff, "if you've got the guts to face him."

So Frankie, playing Johnnie Concho, reached for the gun, which leaped out of the holster like a jack-in-the-box.

Then Frank, forgetting all about his character, shouted delightedly, "That's a motheree! A real gasser!" He tried it again, and it worked again. "Will you look at that!"

A lot of people have written a lot of words about Frank Sinatra, trying to explain just what makes him tick at such a mad pace. They say he's proving something to himself or to the world. He's sensitive and touchy, and suspicious of people until he knows them, but then he's the most loyal friend you could have. No one, including Frank, has kept track of his generosity to anyone who needed help. If you mention the subject to him, he shrugs and says, "I've got the dough. I might as well use it, spend it, give it away."

Tons of newsprint have been devoted to the breakup of his two marriages, first to Nancy and then to Ava Gardner. Probably his greatest devotion is to little Nancy, his daughter, whom he used to sing about in "Nancy With the Laughing Face."

I'm not going to use up any more newsprint rehashing all that stuff, nor trying to explain what makes Sinatra simmer. But one thing I do know—he's got so much talent that it's bound to come busting out all over.

United Artists

Frank's drive for success makes him willing to try varied roles

the OUTCAST

by J. L. BOUMA

THE LAW HAD cleared Garrity . . . but to the people in Bearclaw Valley, he was still known as the man who had murdered Christina's brother

GARRITY saw her the day he returned, a full-bodied girl with spectacular chestnut hair, driving a buckboard along the bank of the broad creek that ran its leisurely way the length of Bearclaw Valley and on through the pass to the rougher country beyond. He saw her first through the willows that screened the creek, sitting erect as a soldier on the swaying seat, and handling the lines with the effortless ease of a top hand.

She wasn't driving fast, naturally—not under so hot and yellow a New Mexico sun. The only reason Garrity had stopped was to water his mustang and to cool off

himself. He knew he had no business on Hatchet graze, not even after the four years he had been away. But the pass was close by, and Garrity saw no reason to hurry just because a girl was driving a buckboard in his direction.

Because he was not without feelings, Garrity knew that he would linger for the very reason that the driver was a girl. Four years without seeing a woman was a long time, he told himself, and smiled a thin smile.

He straightened, reached the reins, and led the mustang through the willows to the edge of the road. The dust of travel lay thick on his new jeans and gave them a faded look, and the cheap black hat they had given him when he left the jail already showed the powdery rime of dried sweat around the brim.

He was tall and heavy-boned, with a brutal leanness about his face. His skin was burned dark, and his eyes were bleaker than they should have been. Thick black hair curled across his forehead as he pushed his hat back. He could hear the rattle of the buckboard then, and he tightened the cinch a little and swung into the saddle.

He looked around. The slopes that spread out on either side, to shape the western end of this valley, were covered with aspens the golden yellow of summer. Bearclaw Valley boasted a wealth of grass and wild hay and water, and old Dan Sumpter had looked upon it with favor and had taken it for his own, long before Garrity's time. He had held it ever since. For a moment Garrity remembered when he had been welcome here at Hatchet. Yet he knew there was no point in hashing over the past. He could recall it well enough, and maybe in the end that was all that mattered.

He took out his tobacco sack and began to build a cigarette. His fingers were strong, brown and calloused. He put the cigarette between his lips, struck a match, and drew smoke into his lungs. His gaze swung to where the road turned out of the pass. That was where Billy Sumpter had been found with two bullets in his chest, Garrity remembered. That was where it had started.

The thought dulled his spirits, which had lifted at the sight of the girl. So, indifferently, he turned his head as the girl drove toward him. Her hair was light and fine, and redder than he had thought. It was parted in the middle and combed back in waves, and it had been gathered in a bun low on her neck. She wore a green dress with short sleeves and a white collar, and her arms were round and golden brown. Slender, she was, and yet deep bosomed, a girl ripened to womanhood.

He saw it then, of course. Nobody ever forgot features like that, the proud cast of the Sumpter nose, the generous and yet firm mouth, the steady green-blue eyes that did not know the meaning of fear. He might have guessed, he told himself. He might have remembered that Dan Sumpter'd had a daughter as well as a son, and that her name was Christina.

She gave him a quiet appraisel as he touched his hat. Interest quickened her expression, and she smiled and stopped the sorrel she was driving.

She said in a throaty voice, "Don't I know you?"

He hesitated briefly. "I'm Pat Garrity."

He did not know what to expect. He saw her eyes grow blank, and then a sudden hate filled them. Without a word, she reached for the stock of the rifle that protruded from the boot fastened to the side of the seat.

She would have the Sumpter hair-trigger temper, naturaly. Garrity lunged out of the saddle, hit the seat of the buckboard, and clamped his fingers around the barrel as his weight carried them both to the ground. She fought him, and swore like a mule skinner; she struck at him with her fist. With a burst of anger, he wrenched the rifle from her and climbed to his feet.

He said harshly, "You're the first Sumpter I ever met who'd shoot an unarmed man."

She rose, slapping dust from her dress, and looked at him with flashing eyes. "I gave you the same chance you gave Billy," she said bitterly.

Garrity had guessed that he would run into trouble on his return, but not this kind. On the other hand, if anyone had a right to be bitter, he was the one.

"You don't know anything about it; you were back East in school when it happened. But you should know by now that I've been cleared."

Her eyes flashed scorn. "Not in my mind you haven't."

He shook his head slowly, regretfully. "I can understand why you might doubt me, because you've probably heard only one side of the matter. Why don't you let me tell you my side?"

"I don't think it'll make any difference," she said stiffly.

"I figured so. You Sumpters are stubborn, but you're going to listen to me just the same. One thing you heard is true—Billy and I didn't get along, toward the last. We were both interested in the same girl."

"Helen Turner," she said quickly.

HIS gaze was wooden. "That's right. We fought over her in town. Then we left at about the same time. The next morning they found Billy and accused me of killing him. But I didn't do it, as I explained at the trial. When I got back to the ranch, it happened that Art was gone. Otherwise he would have stood up for me."

"Do you know that your cousin—" she began. Then she stopped and gave a hard laugh. "Never mind. There wasn't another person in this country that wished Billy harm except you. You were the one."

Garrity winced. "I don't like to hash this over, but I see I have to. The judge handed me a life sentence."

"They should have hanged you," she said bitterly.

Garrity stared at her without expression. "You really hate me, don't you? Suppose they had done just that. Then what would you have thought when this fellow Kennedy proved I was innocent?"

"Maybe he lied," she said.

Garrity sighed. "I didn't even know the man, but I know his story. Two months ago he was shot during an attempted holdup near Taos. When he learned he was dying he confessed to killing Billy. The sheriff down there listened to him and believed him. He got the governor interested.

"Kennedy was still alive. He was a stranger around here, but he knew everything there was to know about Billy's murder. He was in town the day Billy and I fought, just drifting through, he said. And that was proved because Marshal Bryan went to Taos and had a look at him and said he remembered having seen Kennedy in town that day.

"Kennedy told how he followed Billy to the pass and shot him. He even told what Billy was wearing, and all the rest of it, little things he couldn't have known unless he'd done the killing himself. Then he died, and all I can do is thank heavens that the governor reconsidered my case and gave me a full pardon."

"I still think Kennedy lied," the girl said stubbornly. "He didn't know Billy, didn't give a reason for killing him."

Garrity nodded soberly. "I know. And Kennedy was an outlaw and a gunfighter. But the truth came out of him in the end. Why he refused to give a reason for killing Billy, I don't know. He just wouldn't say. Personally, I think somebody hired him to do the job."

"You would naturally think so," she said contemptuously. "Anything for an excuse. But I'll tell you something. Billy was well liked and folks remember him with kindness, and all they remember about you is that you killed him." Her lips twisted with bitter malice. "There's nothing here for you, Garrity; you might as well clear out. And when you do, don't cross Hatchet range, because either I or one of our hands will shoot you on sight. That's a promise."

Garrity's mouth hardened. "I didn't come back to make trouble," he said angrily. "I came back to take over my ranch, and if folks will leave me alone, I'll leave them alone."

There was the sudden crack of a rifle shot from the slope, and in that same moment the bullet screamed past the crown of Garrity's hat. He lunged forward, grabbed the girl around the waist, lifting her off her feet, and dove headlong into the brush. Dust spurted as bullets struck around them.

Garrity snapped, "Get behind that rock over there!" and threw himself recklessly at the slope, as another bullet screamed close by.

He looked up and saw no sign of the gunman, but he spanged a shot up there just the same. Then he scrambled and clawed his way to the top of the slope and levered a shell into the chamber.

Chest heaving, he scanned the distance and saw a horseman galloping along a draw. Garrity knelt and fired. He thought he saw the

CHRISTINA SUMPTER

PAT GARRITY

rider jerk, but he could not be sure. The horseman was out of sight before he could fire again.

He came back to the girl, the rifle lax in his hand. She looked into his sweating face and laughted. "Didn't I tell you you weren't welcome around here?"

He shrugged his shoulders and passed her. In that moment she jerked the rifle out of his hand, whirled, and fired. There was a dry *click*, and she jerked the lever frantically to pump a shell into the chamber.

Garrity jumped her and bore her down before she could complete the action. The feel of her body as she twisted against him snapped his control. Gripping the hand that was holding the rifle, he locked an arm around the curve of her waist and drew her hard against him, overcome by a hunger such as he had never known. Her thighs flashed as she tried to kick him, and her head strained back.

His hand moved, gripped her hair, and brought her face up. He saw the hate in her eyes, but he didn't care. He kissed her roughly, and felt her stiffen against him. When

KEARNEY

HELEN TURNER

he raised his head, he saw that contempt had pushed hate aside. He was suddenly and terribly sorry for what he had done. He rose and stepped back, and she got to her knees, still holding the rifle.

"You're a damn beautiful woman, so don't blame me altogether," he said harshly. "Now if you still mean to shoot me, go ahead. You won't get another chance."

She rose to her feet and stood silent. Her hair had come loose, and dust smudged her cheeks. Slowly and deliberately, she levered a shell into the chamber. Then, still wordless, she went to the buckboard, slid the rifle into the boot, and started to fix her hair.

GARRITY chuckled grimly. "Do you have any idea who might have fired those shots at me?" he asked. Then he paused. "Or at both of us, for that matter. Whoever it was didn't seem to care which one of us he hit."

The girl whirled, her expression startled. "By golly, you're right," she said.

"Has there been trouble on the range?"

CHARLIE HADDOCK

She frowned, started to say something, then shook her head angrily. "You're the cause of it, Garrity. Clear out; nobody wants you. You've been warned twice now, and the third time might prove fatal. Remember that." She climbed to the seat, picked up the lines, and drove away without a backward glance.

Garrity smoked a cigarette before he rode on, brooding over what had happened. Then he pushed the uncertainty aside. Let folks think what they liked. Maybe in time they would change their minds and accept him again. Meanwhile, he meant to work with Art and make up for the lost years.

He followed the road through the pass, and looked upon a country of tawny yellow grass ribbed by rocky hills, scarred by ravines and canyons. The sun was lowering in the clear sky, and he could smell mown hay and the resinous odor of pine in the mild breeze. This road traversed Hugh Hunter's Bar L range; beyond a line of wooded hills lay Garrity's ranch. He had used a small inheritance to buy the place, six years ago, and a year later his cousin, Art Miller, had come from Texas to work for him.

Garrity left the road finally and trotted along a fence line that was in need of repair. He wondered at this. There was no sign of cattle, but then at this time of year Hunter's beef would be grazing on the high meadows that abounded in the hills to the south. Garrity picked up a climbing trail that led through scrub timber. It leveled out and then sloped downward, and Garrity reined up his mustang and looked over the broad acres that comprised his range.

From where he sat he could make out the log house, sheds, and corrals. He nudged the buckskin into a trot, a sudden impatience riding him. He splashed across Red Horse Creek, traversed a slope of thin brown grass, and so came in sight of the ranch buildings again. The place looked empty and somehow barren. He frowned as he swung down and tied his horse at the corral. He had started toward the house when a long, lean man holding a rifle stepped from the barn.

"Haul up, mister!" he said sharply.

Garrity stopped. "Where's Art?"

"He's not here."

"Where is he?" Garrity heard a horse blow.

"Damned if I know, or care. Get out, of here, mister. I have work to do."

"I'm Pat Garrity. I own this place."

"That doesn't matter to me," the man said. "Hit the road. And never mind the questions, you'll find out soon enough where you stand."

"Why, damn you—" Garrity began.

The man brought the rifle up, a stubborn grin on his face. "You must be tetched in the head. Otherwise you wouldn't beg for what you're going to get if you don't vamoose right now."

Garrity stared, trying to remember the man's face. Then he climbed on the mustang and rode out of the yard.

As he approached Rimrock, the thought came that word of his return had preceded him. Art had probably talked about it, of course; that was only natural. And Bryan, the town marshal, must have aired the fact that Pat Garrity was going to be released from prison. And yet neither of them could have known the exact day that he was coming back, which could only mean that someone had been watching for him right along. It didn't make sense.

Art had written less than a month ago, saying the ranch was in fine shape, and he hadn't mentioned trouble of any kind. What had happened? Why had someone tried to kill him? The claws of worry dug into Garrity.

It was almost a new sensation, this worry, for in prison he had schooled himself to ignore everything but the passing moment. He had resigned himself to spending the rest of his life behind bars. But now that was behind him, and he knew that the roots of the worry that had been planted in him at the time of his arrest had never died.

The sun went down as he rode along, and crickets talked in the brown grass near the road. Summer droned in the air. Passing the first scattered houses, he paused to look at a poster pasted on the side of a barn. It announced that Professor Fortunato's Wagon Show would make an apearance in Rimrock on the Fourth of July. And the thought that this was the third day of July in the year 1883 brought an ironic twist to Garrity's mouth. He had missed the Independence celebration in '79 by a matter of days, and he

had missed them all since. Maybe, with luck, he would help celebrate the coming Fourth.

THE town was noisy, the hitch racks crowded. Boots tramped the board walks, and batwings swung on complaining hinges. This was the idle time of year, when men were restless and looking forward to a celebration. It was a good time to come home, Garrity thought, and glanced at the banner strung across the front of Cliff Shorr's two-story gambling house and saloon. He turned toward Charlie Haddock's livery stable.

The sweet-sour odors of hay and manure met Garrity. He swung down as Charlie came from his small office, his mouth open in a yawn. He saw Garrity and grinned with sudden pleasure, a heavy man with a shock of brown hair and mild blue eyes.

"Damned if it isn't Garrity," he said, and the two men shook hands.

Garrity felt a sudden warmth. Charlie Haddock, an ex-rancher, was one man who had stood up for him at the trial. Garrity was still grateful.

"How've you been, Charlie?" he asked.

"There are times I wish I were back raising cattle. Here, let me put that mustang in a stall. I have a bottle I've been saving for you."

He had started to lead the horse down the runway when a voice spoke behind Garrity. "Hold it, Charlie. Mister Garrity's not staying."

Garrity head that statement first in the pit of his stomach. He turned and saw two men standing inside the stable. One was a gaunt man of medium height, with a pock-marked face and eyes that were as small and mean as those of an enraged bull. He was Ernie Yudell. Garrity remembered that four years ago Yudell had worked for Hatchet.

The other was a big man with a heavy dark face. A power of strength came out of him. It would be felt in the way he stood, thick legs spread, heavy shoulders forward, broad hands curled inward.

"Is he the one?" the man growled.

"Mr. Garrity in person," Yudell said. "They should've stretched your neck, Mr. Garrity. Yeah, that's what they should've done. What've you got in mind now that you're free to travel?"

"Nothing that'd interest you."

Yudell grinned at the big man. "What about that, Tate?"

Tate's eyes measured Garrity. "He could be awfully wrong," he growled.

Garrity looked at them, his face hard and expressionless.

"No, it wouldn't be the first time," Yudell said, and watched Garrity with malicious relish. "An ex-con is always better off where he isn't known. You get what I mean, Mr. Garrity?"

"I get it," Garrity said quietly.

Yudell spat. "They took all the vinegar out of him," he said disgustedly. "Well, we're still going to teach you a lesson, Mr. Garrity," he said, and stepped to one side. "Let him have it, Tate."

Tate growled with pleasure, and Garrity watched the man, thinking bleakly that Christina Sumpter was probably the cause of this. She had reached town ahead of him and had told Yudell what she wanted done. He moved before Tate could reach him, and slapped Yudell in the face with all the power of him arm and shoulder. The blow floored Yudell, and his eyes turned blank with shock. Then he went for his gun.

"Don't try it!" Charlie Haddock said. He was standing in the doorway of his office holding a shotgun. Yudell stared, his gun arm arrested. Blood dripped from his nose. Charlie gestured with the shotgun. "Get over to the wall. All right, Pat. If the big fellow still wants it, settle with him."

Tate had circled and was watching warily, and Garrity said impatiently, "Let's get at it!"

Tate growled and rushed. He struck Garrity a wild blow in the body and landed heavily on his jaw. Garrity felt the shock of the blows and relished them. Tate sprang again, shoulders and head forward, arms curved low.

Garrity took two steps away from that charge. He veered to one side. As Tate turned to follow, Garrity stepped in and drove a fist into the exposed face.

It stunned Tate. He blinked at Garrity and his arms lowered. Garrity moved in on him. Cruely and deliberately, he smashed the big man to the wall. His fists struck with quick, battering power. Tate's nose crunched and his lips shredded against his teeth. His eyes

bulged with open fear, and Garrity's fist closed one of them. Tate bleated piteously and brought up his hands, but Garrity's fists drove through them. Tate gave a feeble outcry and saged to the straw-littered floor.

"Well, they'll know now that you've come back," Charlie said dryly. "Yudell, get that big clumsy bear out of here, and don't come back."

Yudell helped Tate to his feet. He gave Garrity a look of glowering rage. "You win this time, Mr. Garrity. But I promise you right now that next time you'll lose." Staggering like drunks, the two men left the stable.

CHARLIE chuckled grimly. "They have have a pugilist—one of those prize-fighter fellers—with the wagon show that's due here, and Tate was all set to sign up and tangle with him. But I don't reckon he'll be doing much fighting for a spell."

Garrity swore bitterly. "Does everyone at Hatchet still think me guilty of killing Billy?"

"Those two boys don't work for Hatchet any longer. Yudell is Kearney's foreman," Charlie averted his eyes, embarrassed.

Garrity looked at him sharply. "Kearney was Hatchet's foreman when I left. What happened to make him quit?"

Charlie shrugged. "Let's have a drink." He got a bottle and glasses from his desk, and poured. "Mud in your eye."

Garrity sighed. "First one in four years, Charlie, and I can't say I enjoyed the long wait."

"How'd they treat you?"

"A man can get used to anything," Garrity said, and then told Charlie about having been run off his own place.

"Tall thin fellow? That must've been Colton," Charlie said.

"What's been happening around here? Where's Art?"

"I don't know." An expression of sadness moved across Charlie's broad face. "You'd better talk to lawyer Deaton."

"What's the big secret?"

"It's not my place to tell you," Charlie said gruffly.

"You can at least tell me why Kearney and Yudell quit working for Hatchet," Garrity said.

Charlie made a gesture. "I don't know the reason. With one thing and another, Hatchet's not what it used to be. Dan Sumpter had a stroke and is just about helpless. Then rustlers hit him, and he had a big die-off last winter. Somebody cut his drift fences and his beef got caught in those little canyons east of his place and were snowed in. His losses were so heavy that he had to start laying men off. Some quit. Christina's been running Hatchet with the help of four hands, where they used to feed twenty."

Garrity shook his head. He said he'd noticed that Hunter's place looked run-down, and Charlie agreed. "Hunter's been trying to sell his place." Charlie broke off and studied Garrity with speculative eyes, then grunted and said, "He's been getting old and letting go the last couple of years. Next to Bearclaw Valley, his is the best range around here."

Heavy footsteps entered the barn. Garrity turned and saw a husky young fellow in the doorway. He had a short wide nose, meaty lips, and cold blue eyes. There was a star pinned to his buckskin vest.

The fellow glanced at Charlie, jerked a thumb toward Garrity and said, "Who's he?"

Garrity said harshly, "Ask me, don't ask Charlie!"

The man sneered. "All right, I'm asking you."

"I'm Pat Garrity."

"Been doing time, is that right?"

"I think you know damn well that I've been doing time."

"Don't get hard with me, mister. I'm Hank Harnett, the marshal of this town, so watch yourself. Things have been nice and peaceful around here, and I won't stand for a jailbird making life tough for me. Start anything in my town and you'll go back where you came from and fast."

Garrity's sudden grin was ugly. "Sure," he said.

Harnett gave him a hard stare, and then went out.

"Well, that was short and sweet," Garrity said. "Two months ago Bryan was still marshal, and he'd been in office how many years? Ten or more, anyhow."

"That's right. But when the city fathers got together at the last election, they decided to try a new man."

"Harnett must've heard about the fight," Garrity said. "Which means this was my third warning." He told Charlie what had happened at the pass, and Charlie shook his head slowly.

"Christina thought a lot of her brother, so you can't blame her for flying off the handle. But I'll be damned if I can figure out who took a shot at you."

Garrity was silent a moment. Then he asked what had been in the back of his mind since he'd left prison. "Charlie, where's Helen Turner? Is she still in town?"

Charlie scowled. "She works for Shorr," he said shortly. "Sings in his place."

That stopped Garrity for a second. It was true that Helen had a voice that tore at a man's heart, but he'd never expect her to peddle it in a saloon. Not that Shorr ran a honkytonk, but still it was kind of a blow to learn that she was singing there.

"Working for Shorr, huh? How's he doing?"

"You don't ever have to worry about Shorr," Charlie said dryly.

"Well, I'm damned. I thought Helen would be married, or still working in her father's store, not singing for a living."

"She could be married and still singing in the saloon," Charlie observed. "But she's not married. And her father sold out and moved to Iowa over a year ago."

So Helen was still single. Garrity felt suddenly happy, as he evoked a picture of her blond loveliness, the blue eyes that a man could lose himself in without half trying. He'd spent countless hours in his cell thinking about her, and his hunger, too long restrained, was roused at the thought that he would see her tonight.

He sighed gustily. "Any idea where I might find Deaton?"

"Bob spends most of his evenings playing poker at Shorr's since his wife died," Charlie said. And then he added, "Do you have any money?"

"A few hundred dollars I kept at the prison to draw on for tobacco and things like that."

"You're welcome to bunk in the loft."

"Thanks anyway, Charlie. I've been hankering for a real bed, so I'll stay in the hotel."

"Stop by after you talk to Deaton," Charlie said.

SHORR'S place was as big as a barn. Lamps with polished reflectors brightened the room. In back was the gambling lay-out. Stairs led to a gallery where several doors opened on to private dining rooms. Even though it was early, the barroom was crowded, and the air was festive. Men lined the long bar, and the gambling tables were doing a big business. A man in a bowler hat was playing a piano on a small stage. There was much lively talk and laughter, the scuffing of boots and scraping of chairs.

Garrity walked through it all toward the tables where men were playing poker. He was scanning the players when a low, yet ringing, voice called his name. He knew before he turned that it was Helen. The sight of her made him feel as if he'd come up against a wall in the dark.

She was standing on the gallery, her hands on the railing, looking down at him and smiling. He climbed the stairs, watching her, and she straightened and swung toward him with a rustle of skirts as he came up.

"Helen!" he said.

"Pat, its so good to see you again!"

"You're looking fine," he said awkwardly.

She laughed. "You mean I haven't changed?" She glanced down at the crowded barroom and reached out for his hand. "This is hardly the place to talk." She opened a door. The room was dark. Moonlight came through the curtains. "Pat," she murmured, and it seemed to him that she swayed against him. He took her voluptuous body in his arms and kissed her warm mouth, and she made a little moaning sound. "Pat."

In the dim light he saw a corner of her mouth curve upward, and when he kissed her again it was still not enough. His fingers groped along the softness of her body, and she gave a throaty chuckle.

"Please don't, honey," she whispered, and he sighted and stepped away from her.

"I've had you on my mind," he said dryly.

"I'll bet you have."

He was silent a moment. Then he said, "Helen, where's Art?"

"I don't know, but he—" She broke off. "Haven't you talked to anyone?" She sounded suddenly cool, almost indifferent.

"I talked to Charlie Haddock, but he passed

the buck. Now I'm here to see Bob Deaton."

"I haven't seen Art for—oh, some time," she said distantly. "He used to come here quite often. Did he ever write and tell you?"

"Once. He said he'd been seeing a lot of you."

"Well, we did go out a few times to socials. But it wasn't what you might think. Not the way it used to be with you, Pat." Her fingers patted his cheek.

"Helen," he said, "can't we—"

"Please, not now," she said. "I have to sing in a few minutes, and we'll see each other again. If you want to see Deaton, he's probably playing poker in the back room downstairs." She moved out of the room. Her gown was cream-colored velvet and her shoulders were bare. She gave him a dazzling smile. "We'll be awfully busy tomorrow, but I might have a chance to see you."

He forced a smile, thinking her invitation could have been more personal; he had the feeling that she might have said the same thing in the same way to any other man.

"I hope so," he said, and she smiled again, walked to the end of the gallery, and entered a room there.

Garrity went downstairs to the back room. There were four felt-covered poker tables in the room, with a lamp above each table. Brass cuspidors gleamed in the light; and the paneled walls were covered with hunting prints.

There was play going on at only one of the tables. Bob Deaton, a stringy man in a rumpled suit, sat with his back to Garrity. Across from him was Cliff Shorr, tall and blond and whip-lean in a black broadcloth suit. Kearney, chunky and with a tough face that seemed always to hold a sneer, sat next to Shorr.

He looked up as Garrity came over, and his expression became utterly still. "Look who's here," he said roughly.

Garrity's mouth hardened. He had never really known Kearney, and yet he had always and instinctively disliked the man. "Your boys tried to get rough with me a while ago. Why?" he murmured.

"How the hell do I know? Yudell liked young Sumpter—maybe that's it. Why ask me? I don't give a damn who they get rough with, as long as they do it on their own time."

Bob Deaton had pushed back from the table, and now he offered Garrity his hand. "Good to see you, Pat. Be right with you," he said quietly, and picked up what money lay in front of him.

Shorr was smiling. He had a handsome, bony face. "I heard you got off on the wrong foot, Garrity."

Garrity regarded him coldly. "I didn't start anything and I don't mean to start anything, but I'm not taking any guff, either."

"He'll soon know where he stands," Kearney said.

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" Garrity asked quietly.

Kearney reddened at the insolence in Garrity's eyes. "I'm not in the habit of making threats," he said shortly. "You might remember that." His gaze was flat and dangerous.

Deaton rose and took Garrity's arm. "Come along, Pat."

Kearney said something that sounded like "Damn jailbird," and Garrity started to turn, but Deaton kept a tight hold on his arm.

"None of that," he soothed. "A barroom brawl wouldn't help matters." Garrity looked at him. They went out and crossed to the hotel, where the lawyer had a room.

Garrity said, "Let's have it, Bob." and waited impatiently.

Deaton sat on the bed and rubbed his bony hands together as if they were cold. "Well, to begin with, you signed the ranch over to Art Miller."

"What else?" Garrity interrupted impatiently. "I was going up for life, so what good was the ranch going to do me? But Art and I agreed that if by chance I got out, he'd sign the place back over to me. You know that."

Deaton nodded sourly. He looked up and said, "He's gone, Pat. Where, I don't know. He sold the ranch about the time this business started about you getting a pardon. He sold it to Kearney."

GARRITY felt a hollow open inside him, felt sickness enter it. He had sensed it would be bad, but not this bad.

"Art's my cousin, my friend." He gave a short laugh. "Now that's the one thing I never considered. He wrote not long ago, saying everything was fine. But you didn't mention it in your last letter, either."

"I saw no point in getting you upset. There was nothing you could do about it anyway, because the place was legally his."

Garrity struck a fist in his palm. So this was what Christina Sumpter and the others had hinted at. "Now that's really something," he said. "And I had it in mind to make Art a full partner. What made him turn on me?"

Deaton shrugged. "He took to gambling, for one thing. Spending money on—" He shrugged again. "Well, never mind. The main thing is he was suddenly the owner of a ranch. Then out of a blue sky word reached him that you might be pardoned. I reckon he thought he'd have to go back to working for forty and found, and he couldn't take it, so he sold out and skipped."

"What did he get for the place?"

"Eight thousand."

Garrity stared. "That was about two thousand more than the place was worth."

"It surprised me, too, but that's what he got for it."

"And you've no idea where he went?"

"All I know is he collected his money in cash and disappeared."

Garrity rubbed his face. Then he straightened and took a gusty breath. "Well, there's no point in crying over spilled milk. I'd better forget the whole thing and start from scratch."

"What do you figure on doing?"

"I don't know yet, but I mean to do it around here."

"You might run into trouble, Pat."

"Trouble?" Garrity gave a hard laugh. He told the lawyer that someone had tried to kill him at the pass. "Why? And why did Yudell and that man Tate jump me?"

"I don't know."

"There's something behind it, Bob. For all they knew I might have left town after learning that I'd lost the ranch. But they couldn't wait to find out. So they jumped the gun and tried to send me packing. Say, has there been any trouble on the range?"

"A little," the lawyer admitted, and mentioned rustling. "Two small ranches changed hands out your way, and Kearney has been pushing his weight around. There are four men on his place, including himself, and that makes two more that he really needs."

"Has he tried to move in on Hatchet?"

"Not yet. Hunter blocks his way to the pass, you know."

Garrity heaved a sigh. "I sure worry somebody. But I mean to stay here regardless. If I can't get a riding job I'll break horses or haul wood, anything at all. And if nothing turns up I can wait. That's one thing I learned how to do in prison, Bob—wait."

He left soon after that, went over to the livery stable, and talked to Charlie for a little while. Then he returned to the hotel, rented a room, and thought about what had been done to him.

When he awoke next morning he knew he hadn't slept a minute later than he would have been able to in prison. Habit was strong, he thought wryly. But he was aware that he felt better than he should have for a man who had lost everything he had worked for. Freedom was more precious than worldly goods, he decided. The shock and misery of last night was behind him, and now he could only feel indifferent contempt for his cousin. He considered the grim fact that Art would have to live with what he had done for the rest of his life, and would always be afraid of running into Garrity.

He was climbing out of bed when someone knocked on the door. He pulled his jeans on and opened. A stocky young man with ruddy cheeks stood there. He was dressed in range garb and held his hat in his hand.

"Mr. Garrity?"

"That's right."

"I'm Steven Denton. Mind if I come in for a minute? This is kind of embarrassing for me, but I have to talk to you."

Garrity nodded. He started to wash as he waited for the other to speak. Denton, he thought. The name was familiar.

"I used to work for Art," Denton said.

Garrity looked at him and nodded. "Art wrote me about you. You worked for him about two years, didn't you?"

Denton grunted. He had a seedy look to him. "The fact is, he left owing me a months wages, and I haven't worked since."

Garrity frowned. Denton met his gaze head on. "Listen, if you think I'm trying to collect—" he began, his face red.

"Was Art holding out on you?"

"No, he always paid on the dot. This hap-

pened the day he left. He went to town to settle the sale of the ranch and get his money, and he was coming back to pay me. Well, Kearney rode out to take over next day, and told me Art had left town. So knowing about you, and hearing that you were back, I wondered if you—"

Garrity decided the man wasn't lying, and paid him the month's wages. He said casually, "I understand Art gambled quite a bit."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. He spent a lot of time sparking that girl singer at Shorr's, though. He was really crazy about her. He used to buy her little doo-dads, and he even bought her a Morgan riding horse that set him back plenty."

Garrity grimaced. But he had to admit to himself that he'd bought plenty of presents for Helen in the past, too. A man just naturally wanted to make her happy; she was that kind of girl.

"Didn't Art mention at all where he was going?"

"Well, he did say something about taking a trip. Now it's a funny thing, Mr. Garrity, but he looked forward to seeing you, he really did. But I guess it was just put on. Well, thanks again. Say, if you're going back to ranching and need a hand—"

Garrity smiled. "I'll be hunting a job myself before long," he said.

Denton sighed and went out.

PAT GARRITY told Charlie about it later that morning. Charlie had asked him to take a walk to the flats outside of town, where four gaudily-painted show wagons were parked. They had pulled in late the previous evening. Now an early crowd was already at hand, and men were measuring off the distance for the quarter horse races that were to be held, while the wagon show people were busy putting up tents, and carpenters were building a platform where the town band would perform. It was a bright sunny morning.

"I don't get it," Garrity said. "I checked at the depot, and Art didn't take a stage out. Anyhow, why didn't he come back and pay Denton like he promised? Or at least leave the money where the man could pick it up?"

Charlie shrugged. "Maybe he forgot. Or maybe he did leave it with somebody that stuck it in his own pocket." Charlie pointed out a long two-story barn of a place on the edge of town. "They're holding the bare knuckle fights in Powell's warehouse. I guess I told you these show people have a prize fighter along, a fellow named Bruto, who's supposed to be pretty good. He whipped the best of 'em back East, and had some fights in England last year.

"But since prize fighting is illegal in most parts of this country, Bruto travels with the show and puts on exhibitions. They call it the art of self-defense. He takes on all comers, and the man that stays with him five minutes gets a hundred dollars." He grinned. "That's more'n you could make in two months of punching cattle."

"That's a fact. There must be plenty of husky farm boys around to collect."

"They won't last." Charlie added casually, "But you might."

"It's a tough way to make a hundred dollars," Garrity murmured. "I guess he must be a big fellow."

"That's him over there," Charlie said.

Garrity turned. In an open tent behind a table there sat a small man in a loud-checkered suit, and wearing a derby. Standing beside him was a man in black tights. A cape hung from his neck, and his muscular chest was bare. His face was bony and his nose had been broken, and he stood there with an utterly blank expression, punching a fist into his palm.

"He doesn't look very broad through the withers, but I'll bet he's fast enough to run a man ragged," Garrity murmured.

"He won't hit one-seventy," Charlie said. "How much are you?"

"Last time it was one-ninety."

The small man in the checkered suit had noticed Garrity. He gave a wave of his hand and called, "You're a hefty young fellow! Want to sign up and scrap with my boy, and win a hundred dollars?"

Garrity shook his head, smiling. Charlie grunted. "Let's take a walk," he said.

They wandered through the crowd and out into the open. "You could make yourself some money," Charlie said suddenly. "I don't mean the hundred, but by betting on yourself. I think you can whip this fellow. I got the idea when you knocked Tate out."

Garrity stopped. "Is this why you brought me out here?"

"Shorr's a gambler," Charlie said. "He'll cover anything. Since you're not very popular around here, the odds'll run high—five to one, maybe."

"Well," Garrity said good-naturedly, "I have around four hundred left, so at five to one I'd make sixteen hundred. If I won."

"I told you last night that Hunter wants to sell out. He asks ten thousand. No, let me talk. I'm alone in this world, with no kin or dependents. And I have three thousand that's not doing me a bit of good. If I lose it I won't know the difference. But if you win—"

"Stop it, Charlie!"

"If you win," Charlie went on stubbornly, "it means we can buy Hunter out. I've been wanting to get back to the cattle business, and just thinking about it makes me feel ten years younger. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. And don't worry about the odds. I've already been thinking along that line. Well, what do you say, Pat? We'd be partners. Is it a go?"

An odd expression moved painfully across Garrity's face. He murmured, "Good old Charlie." and there was an undercurrent of emotion in his voice.

It was in him to refuse, and yet he could not help but feel excited. The way things stood now, he had damn little money and no job. And what if he lost that dab of money? Suppose they took the chance, and he won? If Charlie got any sort of odds at all, they'd be able to buy Hunter out and have enough left over to carry them for a spell. It was, he decided soberly, the chance of a lifetime, with nothing much to lose and everything to gain.

"Well?" Charlie said impatiently.

Garrity took a long breath. He reached in his pocket. "Take this money; it goes in the pot. Now let's sign up before I change my mind."

THE two events that took place in Rimrock that day roused almost as much excitement as the holiday itself. The first concerned Charlie Haddock's bet. He walked into Shorr's place around noon and announced casually that he'd learned Pat Garrity, had signed up to fight Bruto. Shorr was there, and he laughed and said Garrity must

"I've had you on my mind," Garrity said dryly.

be hard up for money. Charlie shrugged and allowed Garrity might just last five minutes and win himself a hundred dollars.

Shorr chuckled at that and said he didn't think so, and that he was willing to lay odds of three to one on it. Charlie studied on this. Then he asked casually what kind of odds Shorr would give him that Garrity knocked Bruto down and out, and Shorr laughed again and said he'd go six to one, and for Charlie to name his own poison.

The place being crowded, a long sigh lifted as Charlie promptly plunked a roll on the bar and said that there was thirty-four hundred dollars, and for Shorr to put his money where his mouth was. Shorr paled visibly and smiled a tight smile, but he'd named the odds and had to cover, and he knew it.

"You sucked me in real nice." he told Charlie, "and I don't guess I'll ever forget it."

The second event concerned the fight itself. Powell's warehouse was crowded to the rafters, at a dollar a head. Three men had signed to tangle with Bruto. The first one—a big husky kid with a meaty face and the shoulders of a bull—swarmed all over Bruto, or so it seemed. Bruto ducked and slid away,

and a few of the spectators jeered. The fight was two minutes old when they heard a clean *smack,* and saw the big kid shudder all over and slump to the floor. Bruto stepped back and looked around with his cold and expressionles gaze, and yawned.

Garrity was next, and this time the jeers were directed at him. He and Bruto fought for an hour. During the first five minutes he was knocked down seven times, but each time he staggered back to his feet. The meaty sound of blows echoed through the warehouse. Garrity wore jeans and a pair of socks, and that was all, but after half an hour he looked as if he were wearing a red vest, he was bleeding that badly. A few of the more squeamish spectators demanded that the fight be stopped.

Garrity had scarcely landed a blow, and his face was a battered wreck. Finally Charlie himself yelled hoarsely that Garrity should quit, but nobody listened; it had gone too far to stop now. Bruto's fists were beginning to lose their earlier power, and Garrity seemed made of iron. Some of the more observant noted that, toward the end, Garrity looked up to where Christina Sumpter sat on the baled hay that had been tiered against the wall for seats.

Her face was ashen and her eyes were hard, and it was after Garrity looked toward her that he threw himself at Bruto like a man possessed. He rocked Bruto with a blow to the body and stunned him between the eyes. Then his fist drove into Bruto's face, and it was over. Bruto landed on his back, and it was final. Garrity swayed and would have fallen, had not Charlie rushed over to support him.

Christina, it was observed, elbowed and fought her way outside, and she was crying. It was the first time that anyone could recall having seen tears in the eyes of a Sumpter.

Ten days later Charlie and Garrity rode through the foothills of the Indigos, south of Bearclaw Valley, to check over their domain. They had spent the past week with Hunter and his riders, rounding up Bar L beef and taking a tally, and now the ranch was theirs. They rode with a lift to their shoulders.

"Man, I feel about ten feet tall," Charlie said.

Garrity smiled. He felt fine himself. A wide strip of tape held in place the bones of his broken nose, and his eyes were still discolored, but he felt fine just the same. He was back in harness, and that was all that mattered.

Charlie said, "You know what Hunter told me yesterday before he left? He said Kearney had been trying to buy him out right along, but refused to meet his price."

"That's funny, because he paid way too much for my old place. I wonder where he's getting all the money?"

"Maybe he rustled Hatchet blind while he was foreman."

That was possible. Many a cowpuncher, or even ramrod, made a little extra by stealing from their own outfits—but not so that it ran into the thousands of dollars.

Garrity stopped to roll a smoke. Kearney hadn't as yet shown his hand, and it was possible that he didn't mean to. Or maybe he was waiting for the right moment. There was something here that Garrity knew was escaping him. His mind swung to Steve Denton, whom they had hired that morning when he rode in and asked for a job. Denton had claimed that Art had mentioned taking a trip, then he'd collected his money and had vanished just like that. The thought of that had been bothering Garrity right along.

He looked around. Here, where they were riding, was worthless land, a finger of rock and brush at the eastern end of the Indigos that buckled to form the rim of Bearclaw Valley.

These hills were rocky, and covered with scrub trees. Beyond them was the sprawling valley, with its parks and pockets and wandering streams. And Christina. Garrity thought wryly. He had not seen her since the Fourth; nor had he seen Helen.

To Garrity's right a deep gorge ran for half a mile before it joined a broad wash that marked the southern boundary of their Bar L range. Their fence here joined the gorge and swept out of sight on a downslope. Charlie had ridden that way, and now he made an old Army sign—one arm swung overhead in a wide circle—that meant, "gather here." Garrity tossed his smoke away and galloped forward.

WHEN he drew rein, he found Charlie walking around looking at sign.

"Somebody cut the fence back there," Charlie said.

"It wasn't cut when we came through here last week."

"It's cut now. Look at this."

Garrity saw cow tracks—not many, forty to fifty head, he thought. And the scant brown grass here bore the marks of iron-tired wheels.

"That happened last night or this morning," Garrity said, and looked back at the fence. "Who neighbors us over there?"

"Gordon. He moved in about six months ago. And if he runs three hundred head of beef, I'll eat my hat."

"Let's see where this leads us," Garrity said, though he knew very well where it would lead them.

He wasn't surprised when, an hour later, they saw the gather from the pinion of a ridge top. They had followed the tracks clear across the Indigos, and now they looked down on a grassy hollow of Bearclaw Valley and saw the small bunch of cattle grazing, a chuck wagon parked close by, and two horses picketed to one side.

A few trees screened this camp from the east, and from the road that followed the broad main creek westward to the pass that loomed less than a quarter of a mile away. Three riders were keeping the cattle from straying, and two men were standing against the chuck wagon talking. Though it was getting close to supper time, there was no sign of a fire, and Garrity knew this would be a cold camp.

"Somebody," he murmured, "put a foot in Hatchet's door and walked across our grass to get there."

"Not Gordon. He doesn't even have one hired hand." Charlie's eyes were anxious. "What happens now?"

Garrity considered. Down there was free range, waiting for the man strong enough to seize it from Hatchet. He looked carefully, and saw Yudell.

"Kearney's made his play," he murmured. "He's got a toehold, Charlie, and if he isn't moved now he'll never be moved."

Charlie stirred. "This is Hatchet business."

"Maybe. But not altogether. If he takes over here, it puts us in a vise."

"Are you going to talk to Dan Sumpter? Do you think we ought to back Hatchet in this?"

"By the time we see Sumpter it'll be dark, and maybe tonight Kearney'll move more cattle in and spread out."

"Then what'll we do?"

Garrity's eyes were suddenly reckless as he looked across at his partner. "Why, damn it, Charlie, we're going to run 'em out of there."

"I don't know," Charlie said cautiously. "Dan Sumpter might not like it."

"I don't give a damn whether he likes it or not," Garrity said. "We're protecting our own range. Now's the time to hit 'em, before they get too strong. Ride on down there to the wagon and brace 'em, but don't make your play until I bring those three waddies in."

Charlie set off down the slope, and Garrity started a circle that would bring him up behind the held steers. He left his horse at the foot of the slope and, rifle in hand, strode through the grass to the trees overlooking the pocket.

He heard the creak of leather then, and saw that the three riders had met and were watching Charlie talking to Yudell and the other man.

They were close enough so that Garrity heard one of them say, "You think Charlie Haddock'll make trouble?"

"Garrity might when he hears about this," the second rider answered, and yanked his rifle from the boot.

Garrity saw it was Colton, the lanky man who had run him off his old place. "You guessed right," he said. "Drop that rifle, Colton!"

Garrity moved forward, his own weapon hip high and centered on the lanky man, who swore and let his rifle fall. "That goes for the rest of you," Garrity murmured. "I want to see all your artillery in the grass."

Colton guffawed and said, "I'll be damned if you're not shooting high. You don't figure to get away with this, do you?"

Garrity didn't answer. He looked across the pocket and saw that Charlie had a gun in his hand, and he smiled.

"Start pushing those steers back where they came from," he said.

"Damned if you aren't in a hurry to die," Colton said.

"Move!" Garrity snapped.

He tossed their guns into deeper grass and legged it toward the chuck wagon, seeing that Charlie had disarmed Yudell and the other man. The three riders had spread and were pushing the steers forward. Garrity walked faster. He heard high yells then, and the quick hammer of hoofs, and he knew he had underestimated Colton. The riders had started the herd running, and now a half a dozen steers galloped heavily between him and the wagon. He cursed himself for lack of judgement.

Charlie yelled, "Look out, Pat!" and reined to come about.

He had just started toward Garrity when a running steer swerved in mid-stride and struck the horse's rump. The impact knocked the horse halfway around, and drove the animal to its knees. And Charlie, arms windmilling, slipped from the saddle.

Garrity, dodging the last of the steers, felt something tear in him as the horse lurched up and fell on Charlie, then lurched up again. Charlie screamed. He raised a white face as Garrity reached him.

"Watch 'em!" he gasped. "I'll be all right."

Garrity jerked around. The chuck wagon had been knocked over and lay on its side, and he saw Yudell and the other man running back down the opposite slope of the pocket, and that two of the riders were also closing in on the wagon.

HE KNEW then that there were guns in the wagon, and he spanged a shot at the riders as he ran forward. They reined back hard and stopped. The runing man also broke stride, an uncertain expression on his thin, bearded face. Garrity reached him and hit him with the flat of his hand, a swinging blow that caught the fellow on the side of the head and drove him to the ground. Yudell, crouched behind the wagon, fired at Garrity and missed.

Garrity came around the wagon and said sharply, "Drop it!" as Yudell swung a carbine to cover him.

Yudell's small eyes grew hard with rage. He looked at Garrity's rifle and hesitated.

Garrity said with terrible softness, "If you don't drop it quick I'll put a slug through one of your knees. You can depend on that."

Yudell made an enraged sound that was almost a sob. He flung the carbine from him with both hands and, without a word, wheeled to the horses picketed close by. Garrity's roar stopped him.

"Come back here, damn you!" he shouted. "You too!" he added to the bearded man, who shambled forward. Garrity had caught the odor of spilled kerosene, and now he saw the can in the grass and kicked it with his booted toe. "You know what I want done. Be quick about it!"

He turned to glance at the riders then, and waved them in, noticing that the cattle were scattered along the first slope of the hills. Yudell looked at them and muttered a curse. He reached down for the can and emptied it disdainfully on the wagon and its sagging canvas hood. Tin plates and cups were scattered in the grass. Garrity looked at the bearded man.

"What's your name?"

The fellow glanced quickly at Yudell. "Gordon," he muttered.

"Light it," Garrity told him.

Gordon glanced again at Yudell, as if torn between two fears. He reached in his pocket, took out a box of matches, and approached the wagon. He struck a match and tossed it on the canvas, and the kerosene caught and flared and burned with a faint hiss. The flames spread to the bed of the wagon.

Then Garrity looked around at all of them and said in a hard voice, "So much for that. Gordon, keep to your side of the fence. If you want Kearney to overrun your range, that's your busines. Yudell," he said in a softer tone, and turned on the man, "If I ever catch you here again it'll be the last time for you. Now get out of here and don't come back."

Yudell made a kind of whimpering sound, and his voice was high and shrill when he shouted, "We're not through with you. Garrity! We haven't finished with you."

He tramped toward the horses, Gordon at his heels. Then the riders rode up the slope to bunch the cattle. The wagon burned brightly, the leaping flames yellow in the last of the sunlight. The tawny grass had caught in several places, and Garrity ducked low toward the burning wagon and snatched at the edge of a brown blanket that hung there.

He was still using the blanket to beat out the spreading flames when a rider pounded into the hollow. It was Christina Sumpter, dressed in levis and a man's work shirt. She carried a rifle across the pommel.

"Damn you, Garrity! I told you that next time—"

"Shut up!" Garrity's blanket smothered the last of the flames. He straightened, and a long breath swelled his chest. His face was grimy with smoke and sweat. "If there'd been a wind—" he began. But when he turned the girl wasn't there; she was kneeling beside Charlie.

She looked toward Garrity and called, "Damn it, man, get the horses! We've got to get Charlie to the house. His shoulder's broken. Well, don't stand there!"

Garrity swore softly as he threw the blanket down. He went after the horses. When he returned he found that she'd helped Charlie to his feet, and had tied Charlie's arm against his chest.

"He can make it to the house," she said crisply. "Take hold! Watch it now! Damn you, you're hurting him!"

"Don't snap at me, woman," Garrity growled. "If you people watched your range, you wouldn't need outside help to get you out of trouble."

The girl looked at him with a strained face. "Nobody asked you," she said angrily. "Nobody on this place wants your help."

Garrity said, "We didn't drive 'em out of here to help you, but to help ourselves. Next time get your men to do your fighting for you."

Her laughter shook with the sound of tears. "What men?" she said bitterly. "Two of them quit yesterday and went to work for Kearney, and the other two are riding line."

They had Charlie in the saddle and were riding on either side of him, each with an arm out supporting the hurt man. Looking across at her now, Garrity saw that the girl was close to crying, and he knew that anger, and not despair, was riding her. And it came to Garrity what she must have gone through since her father had become an invalid.

Now and then Charlie groaned as they rode along. They splashed across the stream finally and picked up the road. Garrity looked at vast reaches of white grama and side oats, waiting for time and the scythe. Soon now, all this wild grass would be cut and stored for winter feed. No wonder Kearney had made his play, Garrity thought.

IT WAS twilight, and he smelled wood smoke. he could see light shining from the windows of the big house. They swung down, and Garrity lifted Charlie from the saddle and followed Christina inside the house. As they passed the open door leading to the big parlor, Garrity saw a figure in a leather chair.

He remembered Dan Sumpter as a tall, muscular man, and he was startled by what he glimpsed now. The wasted body slumped, and the face was waxen. Only the eyes were still flinty as they met Garrity's in that brief second.

"Bring him up here," Christina said, from the stairs.

He carried Charlie into an airy bedroom and lowered him to the bed.

Christina said, "Ride to town for Doctor Meeker, and don't be all night about it."

"Look, I'm sorry I jumped all over you."

"Forget it!"

"Maybe we had no business running 'em off."

"I said forget it!" the girl half shouted. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned to unbutton Charlie's shirt, with trembling fingers.

Garrity said quietly, "All right, Chris," and on impulse touched her shoulder.

But she jerked from under his hand and said in a muffled voice, "Leave me alone."

Garrity sighed and went down the stairs then, thinking that she was certainly hard to get along with. Helen, now, wasn't like that at all. Helen was older, of course, and she lived a different kind of life. There was something about her that tugged inside of a man and made him want to chase after her and find out what that something was.

"Come in here," Dan Sumpter said.

Garrity hesitated, then entered the parlor. This was the father of the man he had been accused of killing, and there was a sudden grayness in his face as he met the old man's unflinching gaze.

Sumpter said, "What happened?" and Garrity told him. The old man nodded grimly,

"So it was Kearney. He was a good man at one time, but he turned greedy. You'll hear that he quit, but he didn't. I fired him for rustling. Heaven knows how long he'd been at it, but I finally caught up with him and showed him the gate." He looked up. "So you ran 'em out because you were in the middle, huh? Well, since they tried once they'll try again, and you'll still be in the middle."

"Seems to me I've been in the middle before," Garrity said with a trace of bitterness, and saw Sumpter's eyes harden.

"Are you complaining?" the old man demanded.

"I didn't say that."

"You're free, aren't you? You're a damn sight better off than that sidewinding cousin of yours. By God, you can at least stand on your hind legs and fight! Me, I'm chained to this dad-blamed chair and can't even walk."

"Complaining?"

Sumpter gripped the arms of the chair and half rose, rage mounting in his face. Garrity chuckled grimly and went out. But he felt good just the same. In his own way, Dan Sumpter had admitted that he no longer believed Garrity guilty of Billy's murder, and this knowledge lifted a cloud from Garrity's mind.

He stopped by the ranch on the way to town to tell Steve Denton what had happened. Denton was at the corral saddling a horse.

He said, "I was going in to pick up some gear I left behind, so I'll ride with you."

On the way, Garrity said, "You know now what we're up against, so if you quit I won't hold it against you."

"Man, I'm not quitting!"

"Good. Then from now on we'll always work in sight of each other; no going it alone on the range. And if there's trouble, we'll meet it head-on."

"I'm with you all the way down the line."

They parted at the edge of town. Garrity roused the doctor, and a few minutes later watched him drive his buggy in the direction of Hatchet. Riding back to the main street, Garrity mused over what had happened. He knew Dan Sumpter was right—Kearney would try again to get a foothold in the valley.

It was an old pattern wherever men raised cattle, and it was taking shape here. Bearclaw Valley could accommodate more beef than all the combined range around Rimrock, and a man who planned in terms of giant herds would naturally turn that way.

Anger exploded in Garrity, and he damned the man who was back of this. He caught himself then, for he was letting anger take hold of him. While he was sure now that it was one of Kearney's men who had tried to kill him at the pass, there was no way he could prove it.

He stopped and had supper, and was standing outside the restaurant rolling a cigarette, when a stocky man in a black suit wandered across the street. Garrity recognized Ben Bryan, the ex-marshal. They shook hands and exchanged greetings.

Garrity said, "Wandering around out of habit, Ben?"

"It's hard to break a habit."

"I know that only too well."

"Well, they threw me out. Shorr put the pressure on the city fathers, and they decided they wanted a younger man to wear the badge." He shrugged. "There's nothing to be done about it."

"Does Shorr carry that much weight?" Garrity asked.

"He carries plenty. I know of two men on the council that're in debt to him. It makes a difference, when the votes are finally counted."

"Kearney tried to move into Sumpters valley today," Garrity said, and told the ex-marshal about it.

The stocky man made a helpless gesture. "It's free graze, so don't look to the law for help."

Garrity shook his head. "Kearney's sure making tracks all of a sudden. Do you think Shorr's backing him?"

"I couldn't say for sure, so I'll keep my mouth shut. But I'll tell you one thing—you'd better watch yourself. Harnett isn't only the town marshal, he's an authorized deputy sheriff, and he definitely plays the favorites."

"He showed his hand the day I came back," Garrity said.

Bryan murmured, "That's what I mean," and nodded and walked away.

GARRITY pitched his cigarette in the road and crossed over to Shorr's saloon. There were only a few customers in the place, and the gaming tables were still covered. Kearney and Tate and Yudell were drinking at a side table. Yudell started to get up as Garrity entered, but Kearney reached out and pulled him back down. Yudell muttered something and slouched back in his chair, his eyes filled with sullen hatred. His gaze stayed fastened on Garrity as the tall man moved to the bar.

"I'm here to see Miss Turner. Where do I find her?"

"End room upstairs."

Garrity went up and knocked. He removed his hat as Helen opened the door. She smiled quickly.

"Come in, Pat. My, I certainly didn't expect to see you."

She tightened the belt of her velvet wrapper as Garrity looked around the lavishly-furnished room. Then she put her hands on his shoulders, turned him, and stood on tiptoe to kiss his mouth.

"Mmmmm, that was nice. Congratulations, honey, on winning all that money. Now come over here and sit down."

"Helen, I can't stay."

"Of course you can. I have some brandy I want you to try." She flashed him a brilliant smile and went through an inner door.

Garrity lowered himself gingerly to a pink settee and sat holding his hat between his knees. The softness of the rug made him feel like he was standing in cotton. In a moment Helen came in with a tray. She poured brandy from a decanter into two glasses.

"Here's hoping you have luck with your new ranch."

"Thanks, Helen." He downed his drink, put the glass on the tray, and said, "Do you have any idea what happened to Art?"

Her mouth turned sullen. "How should I know?"

"I thought he might have told you where he was going."

"He didn't mean anything to me," she said shortly.

"I understand he gave you a lot of presents, including a horse."

"I didn't want him giving me things. I told him so a number of times, but it upset him so that I took them just to make him feel better. He bothered me no end, Pat. He'd ask me to marry him, and I'd say no, but it never stopped him from asking again and again. And what could I do?"

She looked so helpless and upset that Garrity had to smile. "I guess a man just naturally wants to be around you," he said, and took her in his arms. She yielded with a small sigh when he kissed her, and passion mounted in him. "Say the word, and we'll hunt up the preacher right now."

She laughed and pushed away. It angered him suddenly because this was something about her he remembered. She offered so much and no more, her whole body a deliberate enticement, but never a complete surrender. She noticed his expression and kissed the corner of his mouth, and he was filled with the ache of wanting.

He reached for his hat, and she said quickly, "Do you have to go, honey?"

"Is Shorr backing Kearney?"

Her eyes looked blank for a second. Then she laughed and said, "Why, honey, how should I know?"

"I thought you might have heard something."

"Even if I had I wouldn't tell you, honey. You can't expect me to talk about the man I work for."

Garrity had to admit this showed integrity of a sort. "I was just wondering," he said.

She smiled. "I was thinking about you," she said softly, and moved closer to him. "I'm taking a trip to Santa Fe next week, and I thought how nice it would be if we could meet there. Wouldn't it be nice?" she asked.

"If I could make it, I'd go just like that. But Charlie's been hurt and I can't leave."

"That's a shame."

"Maybe we can make it some other time."

"Maybe," she said vaguely.

He left her then and passed Kearney and Harnett at the bar. They didn't speak. He rode back to the ranch to saddle a fresh horse; he meant to see how Charlie was getting along. When he came in sight of the house he saw lamplight shining through the open door. Then he saw something else that made him groan.

Steve Denton was lying across the threshold. When Garrity turned him over he saw a pool of blood. Denton was dead. Garrity carried the body inside and blew the lamp out, guessing at what had happened. It was doubtful that the killer knew Denton had been hired that morning and was on the place, so he had mistaken the puncher for Garrity. He had hailed the house, and the second the door opened he had opened fire.

Garrity thought of Colton. Then he remembered that Tate and Yudell had not been in sight when he came from Helen's room. He went out to his horse and rode in the direction of his old ranch.

Light shone from the house that he remembered so well. He left his horse behind the barn and slipped into the corral. There were two horses inside, but only one of them was still hot and sweaty. Garrity knew the animal had been run hard during the past hour.

A clawing rage tormenting him, he walked softly toward the house and came up to a side window. Colton, his hat on the back of his head, sat at the table cleaning a rifle. He had dismantled the weapon and was oiling the barrel with loving care. His shell belt and holstered gun hung from the back of the chair. He was alone in the room, a lamp at his elbow.

Garrity palmed his gun and came around to the door. He put a boot against it and kicked it inward so violently that the upper hinge tore loose. Colton leaped to his feet, and his eyes turned wild at the sight of Garrity. A whimper broke from his lips, and his face was ashen.

Garrity said, "You're thinking I'm supposed to be dead, is that it?"

COLTON stood there breathing hard, making that same whimpering sound, like a condemned man might when the noose settles around his neck. "I didn't—" he began.

"The hell you didn't! You shot at me and Miss Sumpter the day I came back. And you just got back from my place thinking you'd killed me—only you killed the wrong man. Now you're going to talk, Colton. You're going to confess and then I'm taking you in."

Colton whimpered again, a sound suddenly cut short as hoofbeats approached the house. Garrity snapped a look past the sagging door. Just then a wild yell burst from Colton's throat and he jumped for his holstered gun. He had it half out of leather when Garrity fired.

The bullet broke Colton's elbow, and he screamed and staggered back. Tate's bellow lifted outside, and Yudell's sharper voice joined that bellow as Garrity picked up a chair, broke the lamp with one long swipe, and hurled the chair through the front window. He ran through the house and out the back as a rider galloped around the corner.

It was Tate. He fired twice as Garrity zigzagged across the dark yard and reached the protection of a shed. Garrity ran on to the barn, flung himself in the saddle, and ran his horse up the back slope. There was a final shot then, but no sound of the bullet, as he galloped in a wide swing toward town. He knew enough now to put Colton away for good; enough so that Hank Harnett had to listen whether he wanted to or not. There was nothing else he could do.

The town was livelier when Pat Garrity swung down and tied up at the hitch rack. He saw no one he wanted to see in the big saloon, so he walked on through to the poker room in back and hauled up in the doorway.

There was a game going on, and he saw that the men he wanted were here; both Kearney and Harnett were playing. The other two men were Shorr and Bob Deaton. As Garrity glanced away from them, he met Kearney's startled gaze. Kearney's mouth had fallen open, but he recovered quickly and began riffling his cards.

Garrity halted across the table and said, "You're thinking what Colton thought, and you're wrong. It's up the spout for you, Kearney."

Kearney said, "What?" and glanced at Harnett as though all this were beyond him. Then his gaze swung to Garrity and he said, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You'd all better hear this, because you know what's been going on," Garrity said. "Kearney tried to move into the valley today, and Charlie and I ran him out. Charlie was hurt, but Steve Denton wasn't so lucky. We

hired him this morning, and tonight Colton shot him in the doorway of our house."

Kearney's chair scraped as he stood up. "Why accuse Colton?" he demanded roughly.

"I had a talk with him, and now I'm charging him with murder. Harnett, I want him arrested."

"What did he tell you?" Kearney demanded angrily, but Harnett silenced him with a gesture.

"You say you talked to Colton. All right, then why didn't you bring him in?"

"I meant to, but Tate and Yudell broke up the party, and I didn't want any more shooting."

"What's that?"

"When they rode up to the house, Colton made a break for his gun, and I shot him in the arm."

Harnett stared and wet his lips. Shorr leaned back quietly, out of it, and Bob Deaton rubbed a hand across his mouth and stared at Garrity. Kearney alone moved.

He came around the table and said in his rough voice, "I asked you a question. What did he tell you?"

Garrity's smile was brief. "Worried?" he drawled.

Then the sound of running boots brought him around. Yudell and Tate burst inside, breathing hard, and Yudell's hard bright eyes struck at Kearney. His head jerked once. Then he leveled a finger at Garrity, his expression one of wicked relish.

"There he is. Hank, arrest him! He just killed Colton!"

Garrity felt himself pale. He heard Bob Deaton mutter what might have been a protest. He said hoarsely, "That's a damn lie! My bullet broke his elbow, that's all."

"Your first bullet, yeah," Yudell said. "And your second one tore half his head off. What about it, Tate?"

"That's right," Tate growled. "We saw it as plain as day as we rode up, because the door was open. Garrity leaned over and shot Colton, busted the lamp and the window, and ran."

Deaton rose and said quietly, "Who's lying, Pat?"

"They are."

The lawyer nodded. He looked at Kearney for a long moment. "I reckon you and I have shared a table for the last time," he said.

"If you're siding him, then that's for damn sure," Kearney said. "Take him in, Hank! Yudell'll sign the complaint." He swung to face Garrity. "This is one time you don't get away with murder. This is one time you hang."

Garrity looked at the faces around him in a kind of nightmarish stupor. The overhead lamp seemed to whirl around him and blind his eyes. He stood there feeling sick and bewildered, and then the sudden terrible memory of prison made him shudder. He plunged for the door, moving desperately. He did not see Harnett's gun rise and fall; he saw only a sort of explosion in front of his eyes. Then he stumbled forward into darkness.

PAIN still clawed inside Garrity's skull next morning, and Bob Deaton's gloomy face beyond the bars didn't make him feel any better. The lawyer appeared downright awkward, like a man who is up against more than he can handle.

"It looks bad for you, Pat," he said. "Harnett swore Tate in as deputy marshal, and is taking you to Tascosa this morning."

Tascosa was where he had stood trial the other time, and the thought made Garrity groan. He gave Deaton a sudden startled look.

"Did you say this morning? But the stage must've left an hour ago."

"He's taking you on horseback."

Garrity gripped the bars. "You know what that means?" he said fiercely. "Hell's bells, I'll never reach Tascosa alive. If Harnett doesn't do me in, some of Kearney's men'll be waiting along the road to take over. It won't be the first time it's happened. All Harnett'll have to do is claim he was helpless to prevent it."

The lawyer nodded. "That's why I mean to tag along, just in case."

"They might kill you, too," Garrity said. And then he added, "Bob, what're my chances in court?"

"Slim. The jury will be remembering that you went up once before, and that'll be against you."

"But I was cleared. That charge was erased from the books."

"Sure," Deaton agreed, "but was it erased from memories of the men who'll make up the jury? They'll hear about it, if they don't already remember, and it will influence them whether they think so or not."

The small cell seemed to close in on Garrity, and he had a moment of utter despair. "Then I'm licked," he said.

Deaton looked at the floor. "Kearney didn't waste any time. He moved a herd across your grass and through the pass this morning. By sundown he'll have his beef scattered across a quarter of the valley, and next week at this time he'll be sitting on Dan Sumpter's doorstep." He took his watch out and looked at it. "It's time to go. Watch yourself, Pat."

Garrity nodded gloomily. Then he took a long breath. By pacing their mounts carefully, they should reach Tascosa around dark. He knew that somewhere along the line he would have to make his play. His chance of getting away was one in a thousand, but it was a chance he meant to take. He heard the corridor door swing open.

Tate and Harnett came inside. Tate grinned and rubbed a sleeve across the badge that was pinned to his shirt pocket. "Isn't it pretty?" he said, and laughed.

Harnett unlocked the cell door and stepped back. He said, "Watch it!" to Tate, and then told Garrity to stick out his hands. He took the handcuffs from his belt, and steel snapped around Garrity's wrists. "Let's go."

As they stepped outside, Garrity saw that a small crowd had gathered across the street to watch. He looked hungrily for a glimpse of Helen, but there was no sign of her. Only one figure made a show of recognition, and that was Ben Bryan. The ex-marshal gave a wave of his hand and then turned abruptly away.

Bob Deaton quietly set a horse close by, his elbows on the pommel. Harnett gave him a quick look, then motioned Garrity to the nearest of the two horses tied at the hitch rack.

When they were mounted, he slid his rifle out of the boot and in a loud voice, "Garrity, if you try to escape I'll have to shoot you. I want that understood right here and now. You got that? All right," he added briskly, "move out."

Garrity rode on up the street, and Harnett followed directly behind. When they hit the edge of town, he told Garrity to stop. Then he looked back at Bob Deaton, who had stopped a hundred feet to the rear.

"Where are you going?"

"To Tascosa to defend this man."

"Why didn't you take the stage?"

"Why didn't you?"

Harnett said harshly, "All right, Deaton. But if you interfere in my duties as a law officer, you'll be in trouble."

"I don't mean to interfere," the lawyer said quietly, "but I do mean to see to it that no harm comes to my client."

Harnett gave a short laugh. "Suit yourself," he said, and motioned Garrity to ride on.

He couldn't wait too long to make his play, Garrity was thinking. He looked ahead to where the road vanished in a series of scrubby hills, and he blinked in the strong, bright sunlight.

Harnett pulled even with him. "This is the end of the line for you, sonny," he jeered softly. "I reckon it'll surprise Charley some when he hears the news, but that's to be expected. Charlie can always go back to running a livery stable."

Garrity made a hoarse, cursing sound deep in his throat. Anger shot through him, and he felt sick and hot and a little afraid.

"Keep the hell away from me," he said harshly.

Harnett held the rifle across his lap, the muzzle pointed at Garrity. "Sure," he said. "And if you're thinking of running you might as well forget it. You get ten feet from me and I'll empty this rifle in you before you can fall to the road."

"Go to hell," Garrity said.

Harnett grinned. "You can run. I don't give a damn if you run. You see, Garrity, it happens I don't like you. I don't like the way you threw your voice at me in Charlie's stable that day. I don't like the way you've been throwing your weight around and getting away with it. The trouble with you is that you haven't much sense. You should've quit when Bruto had you beaten, but you didn't have the sense to quit."

GARRITY looked at him. Rage lurked in the corners of Harnett's eyes, and his mouth was bitter. Garrity said, "So it goes back to that."

"Yeah, it goes back to that," Harnett said. "You won more money in one hour than I ever saw in my life, and it rubs me the wrong way. Me, all I ever get is a handout; then you come along and win a packet. Well, you can't take it to hell with you, Garrity, and I'm glad. You're already dead, and before long they'll bury you."

Garrity said nothing. He could feel Harnett watching him. The man jeered, "Are you going to die easy, Garrity, or are you going to go the hard way?"

"I'll hang easier, knowing the man that tried to kill me is already dead," Garrity said shortly.

Harnett laughed. "You mean that day at the pass? You don't know it was Colton."

"The hell I don't. I took a crack at him and thought I hit him." Garrity glanced at Harnett and saw his brief smile. "Yeah, I guessed it was Colton."

"You made your mistake when you came back," Harnett told him.

"How was I to know Art slipped me the bottom card of the deck? What got me, though, was that Kearney couldn't wait to see me leave. I couldn't figure it out. But I think I know, now—only I can't prove it."

Harnett said cautiously, "Prove what?"

"About Art," said Garrity. "I know he sold me out and all that, but I'll bet he didn't live to spend the eight thousand Kearney paid him for the place."

"What makes you think so?"

"Listen," Garrity said. "When a man wants to sell something badly enough, he's already taken a back seat in the wagon. Kearney could have bought my ranch for half of what he paid, but he didn't. And I'll tell you why. It didn't make any difference to him what he paid, because he knew he'd get his money back."

"You're crazy," Harnett muttered.

"Art collected his money and disappeared, and no one seems to know where he went. I think Kearney had him killed and got his money back, which means the ranch didn't cost him a dime."

Harnett was like a man who is puzzling something out in his mind. Garrity looked ahead. They were in the hills now, and gray boulders showed in the brown weeds along the road. When the road made a short swing eastward, the sun was directly in Garrity's eyes, and for a second he could not be sure but what he had seen something, a movement in a little draw.

"That's why Kearney didn't want me around," he told Harnett. "He didn't want me to get curious about Art."

The movement was there all right, and closer to the road this time. Like water on a hot stove, Garrity's insides sizzled. He was about to warn Harnett, when he saw what he hadn't expected to see. He motioned with his shackled hands in the opposite direction from the draw.

"I saw riders on that slope."

Harnett stared. "I don't see anything."

Christina Sumpter said, "Haul up and drop that rifle, Harnett!"

She had a rifle of her own, of course. She had straightened from behind a boulder, and now she came forward through the weeds, her face pale and determined, her eyes cold.

Garrity saw that much, as Harnett jerked around. Harnett's back was to him then. Garrity pushed with his hands on the horn and came out of the saddle in a great, sprawling drive that carried them both to the ground.

The rest was pure luck, of course. Harnett's head struck the road, that had been baked as hard as iron under the hot hummer sun, and he went limp. Christina found the keys and unlocked the handcuffs.

"There's a horse and guns in the draw for you," she told Garrity in a flat voice. "Get moving, man. Mexico won't be far enough away for you, after this."

Garrity said, "Shut up and get that horse. We've got to clear the road before somebody comes along." It was only then he noticed that Bob Deaton was nowhere in sight.

He lifted Harnett and flung him belly down across the saddle of his horse, picked up the rifle, and started up the draw. Finally he saw the two Hatchet horses tied in the brush, and he stopped and handcuffed Harnett to a sapling.

Harnett had a groggy look in his eyes, but he managed to mutter, "I guess you know where this puts you."

"In the driver's seat," Garrity said. "Now you can sit there and fry until somebody finds you."

He tied the horses in the brush and legged it to where the girl was standing beside the Hatchet mounts.

"I didn't do this to keep you here," she said. "I don't need you, so get going while you've got a chance."

Garrity said, "Keep quiet." He took the gunbelt that was tied to the saddle, and buckled it around his waist. "All I want to know is what's going on at Hatchet."

"Kearney's bringing up another herd. He has six or seven men with him. Dad's sitting on the porch with a rifle. It breaks my heart to seem him like that, but I guess it just isn't any good. There isn't a thing we can do to stop them."

The muscles of Garrity's face felt stiff. "You took a chance just now," he said. "Why, Chris?"

She regarded him steadily. "Because I was wrong about you. No man who fights the way you fought Bruto could shoot somebody in cold blood. I know now that you didn't kill either Billy or Colton. But you'd better hurry."

She broke off as he put his hand against her cheek and held it there for a moment, and she swallowed. Garrity turned to his horse.

"Let's go," he said crisply. "We've got work to do."

"What?" It was as if her face had lighted up from inside. "Work?" she said.

"You'll find out," Garrity told her, and led the way up the draw at a hard run.

THEY circled the town. Two hours later they topped a steep slope overlooking the valley. Cattle dotted the tawny grass westward, and Garrity saw three or four riders in the distance. Christina said, "They moved in south of the creek, but I don't think any of their beef is on the north side."

Garrity clamped his big hands on the pommel and gazed across the sea of grass. He pointed suddenly. "Is there water by that line of cotton woods running north and south?"

"A little, but not much. Not at this time of year."

Garrity nooded. He took his hat off, ran his fingers through his hair, and then put the hat back on again. "A little might be enough, because it's going to have to serve as our firebreak."

She stared at him. "Garrity, you don't mean you're going to burn all that grass, do you?"

"Why not?" he said brutally. "I'll burn every blade in the valley if I have to. There's not much wind, but once it starts it'll keep moving."

Christina gave a little moan. "All that winter feed!"

Garrity said, "Do you want to hand it to them on a platter?"

She gave a stubborn shake of her head. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go home."

Her eyes flashed. "Now you listen—"

Garrity said, "Shut up and do as you're told."

She looked straight at him, and her lips trembled and then came tight together. "Be careful, Garrity," she said harshly, before she turned her horse and rode away.

Garrity waited until she was out of sight before he moved down the slope behind cover. He left his horse in the cottonwoods, leaped across the narrow stream, and sat on his heels at the edge of the grass. The nearest cattle were less than a hundred yards away, and a rider was walking his horse below the slope, rifle across the pommel. He stopped and looked back, as Garrity watched.

Garrity took out his matches and struck one against the small box. When it was burning well he dropped it in the dry grass. A little flame appeared, pale yellow in the sunlight, and it snapped and crackled as it fed on the grass. Gray smoke blossomed. Garrity drew back across the stream, palmed his gun, and waited.

The fire was beginning to spread. A steer lifted its heavy head, bawled deep in its throat, and then moved away. The rider looked around. A startled expression swept across his face, and he roweled his horse

toward the flames. Garrity spanged a shot at him. When the rider stopped, he fired a second time. The rider ducked low in the saddle, spun his mount, and rode away at a hard gallop.

Garrity hurried to his horse. The creek was out of sight behind the hills, more than a mile away. He stopped three times before he got there, and set his fires. Behind him, the flames made a steady roar. They leaped a dozen feet into the air as they swept westward, and left behind dense billows of smoke.

Garrity came in sight of the creek now, and a few minutes later he broke through the willows, splashed across, and came out on the road. A few longhorns had also crossed, but he ignored them as he galloped toward the pass, his eyes open for riders. From his right came the bellowing of frightened steers. He swung down and tied his horse hurriedly, yanked his rifle from the boot, and scrambled up the steep rock of the pass.

Finally he came out on a ledge, looked down, and saw that the stampede had started, for the gap was solid with frantic cattle, with more coming behind. Through the dust and the spreading smoke, he glimpsed riders on the opposite slope. As he looked beyond the pass itself, he saw other riders trying to turn the herd toward the north side of the creek.

A small bunch, driven by shouting riders, started the swing. Garrity took aim on the lead steer and dropped the animal in its tracks. He downed three steers before the rest swung about and ran back through the pass.

A bullet made a high whining sound as it struck a rock at his feet, and he moved from the ledge to a higher position. He had no more than settled in the protection of a boulder when he heard the sound of someone climbing toward him. It was Yudell, rifle in hand, his face twisted with rage and hatred. He saw Garrity at the same time, and ducked out of sight.

"I'm going to kill you, Mr. Garrity!" he shouted.

Garrity did not answer. He looked around, and saw a small boulder the size of a kettle, and lifted it and flung it down before he moved. He crept ten yards away and put his hat upon a rock, so that only the crown would show from below, then eased back and waited.

He could hear the scrape of Yudell's boots below him, but could not see the man for the boulders that protruded from the sloping cliff. He saw that the last of the cattle had swept through the pass ahead of the flames that were dying out against the rocky slope. Smoke still rose from the charred land, and from the trees that had caught fire, and soot filled the air. Garrity's shirt stretched tight against his chest as he took a long breath, aware of a grim satisfaction at the thought that Kearney had tried again and had failed a second time to take over the valley.

The shot came suddenly, and he saw his hat jerk as the bullet struck. From somewhere hidden and yet close by, Yudell shouted, "You're not fooling me, Mr. Garrity! I knew you weren't under that hat!"

There passed a long moment of silence. Then Garrity heard hoofs. He saw Christina swing out of the saddle and start climbing the slope.

Garrity shouted, "Get out of sight and stay out of sight!"

The girl looked up. Then she located him. Suddenly she screamed, "Garrity, watch it!" and ducked out of sight.

Garrity jerked around. Slightly above him and less than ten feet away, braced against a boulder in his stocking feet, stood Yudell, a gun in his hand.

"This is where you step down off the band wagon, Mr. Garrity," he said, and raised the gun carefully.

Just then a shot came from below. It missed Yudell, but it startled him just as he fired. Garrity brought his rifle around.

Yudell dropped to his knees and shouted, "You can't kill me before I kill you! You can't! You can't!" It was as if he were pleading with Garrity.

Garrity squeezed the trigger as he swung his weapon. The bullet broke Yudell's arm and spun him around. His gun fell and slid from the boulder, and he had jumped to grab it when a second bullet caught him and tore through flesh and bone. Yudell fell back then. His head and shoulders struck and he tumbled over out of sight.

Garrity got up and climbed down the slope, and found Christina waiting with their horses. He faced her, eyes blazing, and said harshly, "I told you to go home."

She looked at him half defiantly, her face smudged with soot, a sleeve of her shirt torn at the shoulder. "I didn't want to," she said. And then, "Now what do we do?" She watched him tensely.

He swung into the saddle. "You're going home to tell your father what happened," he said, and galloped on through the pass.

PAT GARRITY scouted the town before he rode down and tied up in the alley behind the jail, not sure but what Kearney and his men were here, or had stayed to round up the scattered herd. He had not seen Kearney, and it was doubtful that the man even knew it was he who had started the fires. Garrity came up to a window and looked in, and then he smiled. Leaning back in the swivel chair, his booted feet on the desk, was Tate.

Garrity came around to the front, opened the door, and stepped inside. Tate raised sleepy eyes. Then his boots came down with a crash, and he rose so quckly that the chair teetered and fell over.

For a moment they looked at each other, Tate with that stunned uncertain air about him, Garrity hunched forward, his hand close to the butt of his gun. Silence crackled in the room. Then Tate's eyes flickered, and he wet his lips and came slowly around the desk.

He said, "Don't try anything, Garrity."

That was when Garrity moved. He lunged forward and struck Tate once in the face, then reached out and took the gun from the big man's holster. He struck again, and Tate slipped and crashed to the floor, then climbed to his knees. Garrity fisted his shirt in both hands, jerked him erect, and flung him at the door, which was still part open. Tate sprawled against it, stumbled on the threshold, and gave a cry as he lost his balance and took a crashing fall to the boardwalk.

People moving along the street heard this sound and turned to investigate. Men shouted and came running. By the time Tate got to his feet, at least thirty people had gathered to watch, and others came forward eagerly and joined the crowd.

As Tate straightened, Garrity's left hand caught his shirt again, and his brutal right fist hammered Tate's nose. Tate yelled, jerked loose, stumbled back against the hitch rack, and stood there cowering, as Garrity closed in on him, a cold smile on his hard face.

"You still have your voice," said Garrity. "Start talking."

Tate took a frantic look to either side. He saw the people watching him, but found no sympathy there, only a curious, waiting silence. Suddenly Garrity laughed.

"There's no help here for you," he said in a voice that cut. "Talk, man! Tell the truth, because if you don't I'll break you with these two hands."

Tate looked at the fisted hands and took a gagging breath. He said hoarsely, "I have nothing to tell."

Garrity struck him then, and Tate didn't even try to block the fist. It made a dull, soggy thud. Garrity struck again, and this time Tate raised an arm instinctively to his face and asked in a broken voice, "What do you want me to say?"

"I want to hear the truth about the shooting at Kearney's house," Garrity shouted in a terrible voice. "And I want you to tell it loud enough so that these people can hear you." He paused and added softly, "Who killed Colton? Say it, man! Who killed him?"

Tate made a desperate sound. "Yudell shot him. He was afraid Colton would talk, so he shot and killed him and said we'd accuse you of doing it."

"Colton killed Steve Denton, is that right?" Garrity said.

"He must've thought it was you who stepped out the door. He didn't want to kill Denton."

"Who told him to kill me? Who gave the orders?"

"Kearney, damn you! When you stopped at the saloon last night, Kearney told me and Yudell to ride ahead and give Colton the word. Then we checked on the herd, and were just coming back to the ranch when Colton yelled and you shot him in the arm and ran."

Garrity swung his head to look over the crowd. Tate made a sobbing outcry, and

lashed out suddenly. He landed twice before Garrity's fist drove against his jaw. Tate shuddered, sank down, and sprawled out, his head hanging loose from the boardwalk.

Someone pushed through the crowd then. It was Bob Deaton. Ben Bryan and four others followed behind. Deaton said, "He's not fit to wear that badge. Go ahead, Ben."

Bryan unpinned the badge of office from Tate's shirt and fastened it to his own shirt.

Deaton said, "I called a meeting of the council, and from what we heard just now you're in the clear, Pat." He offered his hand. "I guess that ends it."

A deep bitterness had settled on Garrity's face. He shook his head. "Not quite, Bob," he said, and turned toward Shorr's saloon.

Except for the bartender, the place was empty, everyone having hurried to witness the commotion. Garrity said softly, "Is she in her room?"

The man jerked his head up and down once, and Garrity walked away from him as men crowded through the batwings. He didn't bother to knock; he opened the door and stepped inside. She had just closed the inner door, and now stood there and stared at him, her face white and drawn. Her sudden smile looked more like a grimace of pain.

"I was just packing," she said. "I guess I told you I was taking a trip."

"To Santa Fe. I know." Garrity treaded the soft rug like a couger, and there was sickness in him. "To Santa Fe!" he repeated harshly. "Is that where Art thought he was going?" He gripped her shoulders and shook her so hard that her head snapped back and forth. "Did he think the two of you were going to Santa Fe? Tell me!"

"I don't know what you mean," she gasped.

GARRITY studied her round, staring eyes, then released her and stepped back. "Art was going on a trip, and he disappeared. He didn't return to the ranch to pay Steve Denton his wages, he didn't take the stage out." He paused. "It's too late for you, Helen. I just had it out with Tate, and he talked."

"But Tate didn't know!" She stopped, her hands gripped tightly, looking at him.

"It was you," he said. "When I left here last night you knew what would happen to me, and yet you could stand there and—"

"I didn't kill him!"

"You were in on it," Garrity said. "Do you know what that means? You'll go to prison, Helen."

"Kearney was back of it; he was the one!" she cried frantically.

"Tell it all, Helen, because if you don't you'll go where I spent four long years."

The door had opened behind her, unnoticed by Garrity. It was only when Shorr pushed her aside that he saw the gambler. Shorr said curtly, "Shut up," and then looked at the tall man. "This isn't a courtroom, so let's have no more of it."

Garrity wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "You're in on this. You backed Kearney's play. And you must know that Art was murdered. I mean to see you stand trial before this is finished."

Shorr smiled. "I'll admit my money backed Kearney, but as for the rest of it—" He shrugged. "Neither Helen nor I know anything about Art's death."

"She just said Yudell killed him."

Shorr turned to her. "Do you remember saying that?"

A sudden expression of triumph and defiance swept fear from Helen's colorless face. She moved closer to Shorr and said, "Of course not. And if he says so he's lying."

Shorr chuckled. "You see?" he said. And then he added, "Garrity, I like the way you handle yourself, and I don't want to buck you." He hesitated. "Are you willing to listen to reason?"

Garrity said, "I'll listen."

"All right. As things stand, we're both in the clear. Kearney and his men are already moving beef into Bearclaw Valley, so you can count Dan Sumpter out of it. Now I want that valley, and I'll tell you why. In the first place, I had Kearney front for me because it would have hurt my business and my standing in the community if I'd gone ahead and made an open play for the valley.

"Once I control it, it'll be a different matter, because people would as soon as not forget what has happened. Now I'll tell you what only Kearney and I know about, which is that

I've got three big herds due here next month. So I need grass and water, and plenty of it. With beef prices what they are, I expect to make a fortune next fall, and I don't want to have to buck heads with you. That's why I'm asking you to be reasonable. I'll even make it worth your while."

He broke off as footsteps hurried along the gallery. The door burst open. Garrity, who had moved behind it, heard Kearney saying hoarsely, "They fired the grass and drove us out!"

Shorr paled. "What's that?"

"That's right. And someone killed Yudell. Maybe it was Garrity—I don't know. But I just heard that he forced Tate to talk in front of half the town. Shorr, I don't like the looks of things. I had to fight my way through that mob downstairs, and I'm thinking I'd better haul out of this town."

"So they burned you out," Shorr said, and his glance flickered toward Garrity.

"Give me my money," Kearney said.

Shorr took a step forward. "Listen, you—"

"I want half of that eight thousand we took from Art Miller!" Kearney said.

In that moment Garrity stepped from behind the door, his gun in his hand. He saw Kearney's frenzied eyes, and then the other jumped back and went for his gun. Garrity fired as it rose clear of leather, and Kearney's body jarred violently. He fell. Feet pounded on the stairs as Garrity bent over the man.

"Can you hear me, Kearney?"

Kearney's eyes were blank with shock, but he nodded.

"You remember a man named Kennedy?" Garrity asked.

A smile hovered around Kearney's mouth, and he nodded a second time.

"When he was dying he told the truth," Garrity went on. "Let's find out if you're as much of a man at bottom." His voice hardened. "Who killed Art?"

"Yudell," Kearney said hoarsely. "He got him in an alley, knocked him out, and took him out of town in a wagon. I don't know where he killed him and buried him. He wouldn't say."

That must've been the reason Yudell had hated him, Garrity thought. The man had felt guilty every time he saw Garrity, and he'd thought he could wipe it out by killing him.

Kearney said, "I'm going fast, man. And you ought to have one more question."

"That's right," said Garrity. "Did you pay Kennedy to kill Billy Sumpter?"

Kearney nodded weakly. "He was friends with Yudell, and we were going to use him to move some cattle. But the kid found out we were rustling his old man's beef, and he braced me downstairs here before you had that fight with him. So I paid Kennedy to follow him out of town and do the job right, then leave the country." He looked up at the faces that stared down at him. "Now I can go easier," he said. and died.

Garrity straightened, and men moved aside for him. He turned to Shorr. "No matter how it ends up at the hearing, whether you're cleared or not, you're through in this town. Remember that."

Shorr shrugged. "There are other towns."

Garrity swung his gaze to Helen and studied her for a silent moment, seeing for the first time the grasping greed that made up this shallow woman. Why had he never seen it before, he wondered.

He said, "You're not worth a damn."

He turned away. The men that blocked the stairs and filled the saloon gave him ample clearance. When he stepped into the sunlight he saw Christina Sumpter.

He came up to her and said, "So you still didn't go home."

"I waited for you," she said quietly. "I want you to come home with me, and to hear your laughter in the house."

He smiled, turned away from her, and went to round up his horse. When he swung into the saddle, he found her mounted beside him. They rode out of town together.

"I love you," she said abruptly.

Garrity nodded. "We'll make out."

She stopped her horse, showing a sudden impatience, and leaned toward him. "Kiss me!" she said fiercely. "No, not like that. Kiss me the way you kissed me that day at the pass. Only this time don't stop, my Garrity!"

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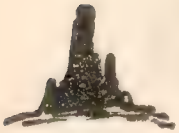
DEATH IN



THERE had been no warning, that was all he could think of at first. No alien noises had disturbed the serenity of the still, scorched air outside, yet there they stood, all three inside the kitchen door, their appearance as startling and unexpected as if they'd climbed out of the woodwork. Ben Talbot's tilted chair banged the floor, and he stared at them, his heart a painful hammer in his chest.

"Easy, Pop," the stocky man said. "Don't get jumpy and you'll be better off." He glanced at the other two. "This is it, boys. We made it."

His wispy beard quivering, Ben Talbot tried to think of something to say, but could not. There was no need to ask who they were. The three fitted exactly the descriptions which had been broadcast over the radio. The stocky speaker would be Carl Cushner, an old convict who was reported to be leading the dangerous trio. The tall slender one with the moody brown eyes was Fred Henderson, the convicted rapist.

The one with the buck-toothed grin would be Buck Boder, a murderer at nineteen, a kill-crazy idiot considered the most dangerous of the three. Ben sat stiffly, wishing Tom would come in from the living room so he wouldn't be alone with the three. But at the same time he hoped Tom would take his wife Grace and his son Timmy and slip out the front door to safety.

Swallowing, Ben inhaled sharply to shout a warning to run, then eased off his breath again, following, as he had for so long, the line of least resistance. Cushner's green eyes spotted Tom's rifle hanging beside the coat closet in the corner.

"Fred, take that outside and put it out of commission," he said to the tall, slender convict. "I'll take a look around and see if there's anyone else here."

Heavy footsteps sounded from the living room, and Tom came in, frowning. Tom's blue eyes flared briefly, then veiled over, and Ben knew he too had recognized the three. He started to back through the doorway, but a snub-nosed automatic had appeared in Cushner's right hand. It looked as natural there as one of his fingers.

"Stay here and join the party," Cushner said, chuckling. "Buck, you scout around and see if there are any more."

Still not moving, Ben exchanged one fearful glance with his younger brother, then stared down at the floor. Buck Boder came back into the room, herding Gracie and Timmy in front of him. They fled to the corner and huddled behind Tom.

"There's no reason for anybody to get scared," Cushner said, in a placating voice. "You folks co-operate with us and nobody'll get hurt. All we want is a good feed and a guide across the desert." He jerked a thumb toward the corner where the three stood stiffly. "Pop, you get over there with the others, so one of us can keep an eye on all of you. Take chairs over if you want to."

Mechanically, Ben Talbot moved to obey. His hands trembling, he carried chairs over for the other three, and one for himself. Cushner's words did not reassure him. He couldn't forget about the senseless killing of the bank cashier after the robbery. The three convicts would not hesitate to hurt any or all of them if it suited their plans.

Looking at Tom's worried blue eyes, Ben knew his younger brother was thinking the same thing. Tom was in an even worse position than he was himself, because his younger brother had a pretty wife and a four-year-old boy to protect. Ben wiped sweating hands on his ragged trousers.

Fear of death was a heavy weight on Ben, even worse than the nagging feeling that Tom's family no longer wanted him to live with them. Time would give him a chance to

THE DESERT

By CY KEES

FOR THE PEOPLE he loved, Ben Talbot would go out to this empty desolation . . . where it took more courage to live than to die

repay, to prove that he *did* appreciate their keeping him in the family, even if he had acted crabby and selfish in the past.

He was getting old, but there was still plenty of time to make up for his careless, shiftless life, now that he saw things more clearly. When he had proved that he could reform, he wouldn't be so afraid to die. Swallowing, Ben shifted in his chair to look at Tom.

The intruders had started a meal, and Tom was eyeing every move they made. Outwardly he seemed calm, except for the way he pressed his son close against his side. Grace sat stiffly, her large blue eyes staring blankly into space. She was shocked, yet seemingly not aware of what the presence of the three men might mean.

Cushner came to confront them, a meaningless smile on his thick mouth. "That's the way we like to see you act," he said. "You play square with us and we'll do right by you."

Those words meant nothing, Ben thought, because the man behind them meant nothing. From the way he had lived himself, he knew all about saying one thing and meaning another. Now he was face to face with what he'd handed out all his life, and he was afraid. The stocky convict's eyes were right on him now, and no matter how he squirmed on his chair, he could not evade them.

"Relax, Pop," Cushner said, his tone pleasant. "We know all about you, and if you show us how to get across the desert, you won't have a thing to worry about."

SWALLOWING, Ben opened his mouth to correct the mistake, to tell them it was Tom who was the guide. Even more than death Ben dreaded the desert, that terrible sprawling monster of seared sand, of spiny, hostile plants sheltering grisly little animals in the eternal eerie silence. Only once had he gone into the desert with Tom, and he'd lived with a hellish uneasiness in him every minute. Sweat trickled down his face. Ben glanced at Tom, hoping his brother would tell Cushner.

But Tom sat in silence while Cushner walked back to the table. The tall, slender Henderson stood in front of the open cupboard doors, gazing at the rows of food. His buck teeth bared, Boder shouldered him aside.

"Out of the way, pretty boy," he said. "We haven't all day."

He pawed through the neat shelves, tossing what he wanted on the table and scattering the rest. Flushing, Henderson watched him, his brown eyes deep and brooding.

"One of these days you'll carry that kind of talk too far, Boder."

Boder stopped and gazed at Henderson, his pale eyes almost closed. "Says who, pretty boy?"

"Shut up, both of you," Cushner snapped. "We have to get going."

Henderson's flush deepened, but he went sullenly to work fixing the food. Ben watched the slender youth, feeling a vague sympathy for him. Ben had had to eat someone else's dirt often enough to know what it was like. But thought of his own danger made the feeling fade fast. Fred Henderson was sure of a chance to change his way of life, and that was more than Ben had. He stared dismally at the scuffed toes of his boots.

Unwelcome scenes from the past plagued his memory, and they were ugly sights. Along with them came the haunting fears of a waiting judgment, and the thought depressed him, even though he had spent his whole life making a sarcastic joke of life after death. Now that the time might be here for him, it was no longer funny. Death was too big a change to make without trying to patch up the things he would be leaving behind. If only he had seen that sooner! Ben shifted miserably in his chair.

If only his parents had lived what they preached, maybe he'd never have gotten so mean himself. It was the fear of Pa's harsh punishment, the memories still vivid in the far past, that had made him start lying and pulling things on the sly. As Ma had backed the old man up, even when he was so drunk he made life miserable for everybody else. Sighing, Ben glanced up again and watched the three convicts fork hungrily at their food.

"We'd better hurry," Henderson said, between bites. He shifted his slender frame. "They might have thought of where we'd go."

"Don't worry, pretty boy, we'll save your precious skin," Boder said contemptuously, his buck teeth bared in a grin. "Stick with Cush and me and you'll make out."

There's nothing to worry about," Cushner said easily, reaching for another slab of bread. "We threw them off the trail when we faked going north. They'll be looking farther away from us all the time." He smiled. "I had this all cased out two weeks ago. They'll never dream we headed for the desert."

While Ben watched, Boder's pale eyes shifted to the four people huddled in the corner. "They won't guess as long as we get rid of the other three, eh, Cush?"

Cushner flushed angrily and glared him to silence. "You talk too much, kid." And then he added sideways, for the four of them to hear, "If they play along with us nobody'll get hurt."

Ben sat rigid, knowing they were only words, that Boder had voiced what the stocky convict had in mind. They would not dare leave anyone who might report to the law; a message could be wired to Baxter Springs across the desert, and a trap readied for the fleeing convicts.

The three had killed once, without good reason, after their escape. They would do it again to make sure of getting a chance to spend the thirty thousand they had grabbed in the bank robbery. Only Tom, guiding them, would be safe until he led them to Baxter Springs. Glancing over, Ben spied the hopeless misery in Tom's tortured blue eyes. Tom knew too.

Gracie was sobbing silently, her hands pressed against her eyes. Timmy glanced hopefully from one to the other. Ben tried to smile at him, but Timmy whimpered and pressed close against his mother's side. Ben stared back at the floor.

It was then that a plan came unbidden and almost unwelcome into his mind. Ben tried to edge his thoughts around it, but it was no use. Tugging at his wispy beard, he wished he had more time to think it over before he made a decision. But, if he did, it would be out of his hands. The three intruders were already washing down their food with freshly brewed coffee. Ben leaned toward Tom.

"Tom, I have an idea," he said, talking very low. "Let them go on thinking I'm the one knows the desert."

Tom's wide mouth twisted with contempt. "So you can save yourself?"

Ben slumped back in his chair, wishing he could hate Tom for thinking that, and knowing he had only himself to blame. Always he had grabbed everything he could from Tom and had given nothing in return. Now when he had one last chance to repay, Tom would not believe him. Ben pressed his quivering hands over his eyes and tried to think.

THERE was only one way to handle it alone. Refusing even to think of what was going to happen, Ben stood up and forced his quivering legs to move toward the three convicts. Cushner had his head close to Boder's, whispering, but he jerked erect at the first step and palmed the automatic from the table.

"You'd better stay put, Pop, or you'll get yourself hurt," he said.

There was no friendliness in that one. The gun pointed squarely at Ben's stomach. Ben swallowed hard.

"I know what you men have in mind, and I'm going to put a stop to it." He fought to hold his voice steady. "If you harm one of those three, I'm not taking you across the desert!"

Buck Boder's pale eyes glittered, and he rose slowly to his feet. "Cush, you let me take care of that old—"

"Shut up, kid, I'll handle this." While Ben waited, Cushner eyed him for a long moment. "Get back in that corner, Pop, and I'll let this pass." His voice flattened. "I'll figure you don't know who you're fooling with."

Feet spread wide, Ben stood his ground. "You don't know who you're fooling with either," he said, and silently cursed his quivering voice. "You need me to get across that desert. If you kill me you're sunk."

"You'll wish you were dead if you don't get back in that corner."

Ben shivered at the grim finality in Cushner's voice. He sensed the futility of trying to convince them he meant what he said. A tense sickness rose in his middle, but he fought it with a despairing kind of anger.

"I'll show you I mean it," he said, through clenched teeth, and threw himself at the gunman.

Buck Boder caught him before he could get there, and pushed him to the floor. His right

foot lashed out, and Ben moaned at the knifing pain in his side.

"Cut it out, you fool!" Cushner said sharply. He stood up and came over to them, seemingly uncertain for the first time since he'd slipped into the house. "Get away from him. He's got to be fit to ride a horse, or we'll never make Baxter Springs."

"I'll put a twist in his arm that'll make him do anything we want."

"Shut up!" Cushner said, glaring. "I'm running this." He stooped, and his strong arm helped Ben to his feet. "Take it easy, Pop. You have a long ride ahead of you." He turned to study Tom, who had turned pale. "I know another way we can do this."

He strode to the corner and stared down into the white face. "You have good reason to be scared, buddy. You just saw a sample of what'll happen to him if you report us. Remember that, if you get the idea after we're gone. If we run into any sign of trouble at Baxter Springs, we'll kill him first. That's a promise." His tone left no room for doubt.

Tom's face quivered. "What if they find out anyhow, without our saying anything?"

"That'll be tough." Cushner's thick lips twisted, and he chuckled. "There's no way we can know how they found out. You just hope for his sake that they don't."

Minutes later, they were saddling horses for the desert trip. His hands clammy with sweat, Ben fumbled with a cinch strap, not daring to think of what was coming next. Carl Cushner and Fred Henderson stood by watching him, while Buck Boder guarded the three in the house.

Ben loaded one packhorse with water and one of the sacks of food provisions Tom had made up for emergency trips. Then he tied an individual canteen to each saddlehorn. Before he was through, Cushner brought a suitcase from the black sedan parked a few hundred feet from the house.

"Make sure you tie this on right, Pop," he said, chuckling, "or things'll really get rough for you."

This would be the thirty thousand they took from the bank, Ben thought, and wondered what the convicts would say if they knew how worthless it was going to be. Buck Boder strode through the kitchen door.

"Hot shot in there tried to catch me off guard," he said. "He's colder'n a wedge, and his woman is so busy getting his head bandaged she won't bother us."

Ben shivered at the words, and he had never felt more alone in his life. He would certainly be alone, with no way to defend himself, when they found out on the desert that he was not the guide.

Shaking off the bleak thoughts, Ben turned to the three men. They were ready to ride. At the last second, Gracie slipped out of the back door, her face streaked with tears, and ran over to him. In her blue eyes he saw a warmth and tenderness he had never seen before. She touched his arm gently.

"God bless you for doing this, Ben."

Ben turned away and mounted, knowing he would falter if he didn't hurry. Leading the packhorse, with the three men following, he crowded their pace past the thick clump of Spanish bayonet at the edge of the desert. Then they were in its eerie silence, the hoofbeats of their horses muted in the sunbaked sand. Clamping his eyes shut, Ben headed his horse straight into the heart of the desert.

WHEN he opened them again, they were beside a giant saguaro, its heavy-barreled body unyielding and eternal looking in the harshness of the desert. When they passed, it seemed to Ben that the huge cactus was watching them, weighing their worth and passing judgment. In that moment he felt vaguely sorry for the three men following him, but he shook off the thought. They showed no mercy, so they deserved none. Squinting his eyes against the scorching sunlight, he led them ever deeper, to where death waited in the desert.

He heard their low voices in some kind of argument, long before he glanced behind. Boder and Cushner had dropped back and had their heads together. The tall, slender Henderson was right behind Ben, looking downward, his face long with a brooding frown. Ben kept his eyes on the two men back on the trail.

Seeming to give in to Boder, Cushner reached into his pocket and handed over the automatic pistol. Checking it, Boder kicked his horse and closed in on Henderson's back. Lost in his own melancholy thoughts, Hender-

son didn't notice. Ben opened his mouth to shout a warning, but at that instant Boder's buck teeth flashed and the automatic cracked loud and sharply.

Without a sound, Henderson slid over the shoulder of his horse and dropped limply to the ground. The brooding brown eyes opened once and stared at Boder, looking hurt and puzzled. Then they closed. Boder laughed, a short, shrill sound. Cushner came up at a fast trot, and Boder grinned at him.

"I don't think he liked me for that, Cush."

Cushner reached out quickly and took the gun from Boder's hand. "You like to kill too much, kid. That'll get you into trouble."

"It made us an extra five thousand apiece, didn't it?" When Cushner didn't answer, Boder frowned. "I didn't like pretty boy anyhow. He thought he was smart."

Fighting the queasiness in his stomach, Ben dismounted stifflly and walked to the fallen figure. There was no pulse. He picked up the dragging reins and mounted again. When he started on, leading the spare horse, he almost envied the still, slender figure on the ground. They didn't know it yet, but Fred Henderson was the lucky one.

All afternoon he hurried the pace straight ahead, going farther and farther into the desert, wanting to be sure there was plenty of distance between the two remaining convicts and the loved ones he had left behind, so there would be no possible chance for the two to find their way back, when he told them. Right after sunset a cool breeze sprang up over the desert, rolling sand over the tracks they left behind. By morning it would erase all traces of the way back.

Dusk was thickening in the silent desolation when he called a halt to make camp. They waited until he was on the ground before they climbed wearily off their puffing, lathered horses. They were tired, but still too wary to give him any kind of chance to break away. Ben sighed. It didn't matter. He had known all the time it would be this way.

Buck Boder limped straight to the pack-horse and untied the suitcase, while Cushner stood by, watching. Ben smiled wryly to himself. The two acted as if he were looking for a chance to sneak in and grab a handful of their precious money, when it might as well be sawdust for all the good it would do them. He waited until Boder had moved the suitcase some thirty feet away before he made his own move. He must be careful now.

He dropped the burlap-wrapped water kegs first, and the food provisions. That was all Tom would lose, and it was a cheap price to pay for safety. Ben unbuckled the four bridles and tied them securely to the saddles. In the near darkness he picked out three egg-sized rocks, then grouped the horses together.

"Hyah!" he yelled suddenly. "Git!"

The five horses broke into a confused trot, eyes rolling white in the gloom. Ben threw the rocks and they bolted away, speeding with a steady gallop into the night. Hearing the

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HISTORICAL HIGH NOTE

By S. OMAR BARKER

There was a bold outlaw named Doolin
Who lived by his guns, and no foolin',
Till Tighlman out-drawed him,
Out-gunned and outlawed him,
And showed him a nice jail to cool in!

---

sound of their hoofs fading in the distance, Ben sighed. His last link with the past was gone, and along with it his one chance to survive.

Carl Cushner came up beside him, the automatic ready in his hand, a dark scowl clouding his face. "You sure you know what you're doing, Pop?"

Ben grinned wryly. "Yup."

Plainly the convict sensed something wrong, but he hadn't started to grasp the enormity of it. "Don't you take off their saddles at night?" Cushner paused, then added, "And are you sure you'll be able to find them in the morning?"

"They'll be back home long before morning."

"Then how—" Cushner stiffened, and the gun came up. "What're you trying to pull off here, anyhow?"

Ben cleared his throat. Although he was afraid, he savored this chance to give them the news. For once they would be the scared ones.

"I've lost us out here," he said, glad that his voice stayed strong. "I sent the horses home so you couldn't use them to find your way back." He gave Cushner a long, level stare. "You might as well face it, buddy. You're here to stay."

"That's what you think." Cushner chuckled, a flat unpleasant sound. "There are ways to force you to lead us out of here. I know all of 'em."

"I don't know the way out any better than you do."

"That's a lie. I got all the information on you before we ever pulled that job. You know this desert like a book."

"Not me—my brother, Tom. He's the one who works as a guide. I never went out on the desert. I was afraid of it."

THE gun drooped in the convicts hand, and thick muscles jerked in his neck. He gazed uncertainly around, as if he could see through the darkness the endless miles of desolation surrounding them.

"We'll backtrack those horses in the morning." His voice was hoarse and lacked conviction.

Ben smiled, shaking his head. "Tom told me all about the desert. The sand keeps moving when the wind blows. It'll be on the move all night, filling up those tracks. You'll never find them in the morning."

Buck Boder had built a small campfire from the dead growth of desert plants. He drifted toward them. "Sounds like a doublecross to me, Cush. Give me that gun and I'll fix him."

"Shut up, kid. This is one jam a gun won't get you out of." Cushner had not even looked at Boder. Now he seemed to droop in his dust-covered clothes. "If what you say is true, you'll die too."

"I'm ready to die," Ben said, keeping his voice low, steady. "You'd better get yourself braced for it."

"Damn you for a crazy fool!" Cushner's breath came in strangled puffs. Blood rushed to his face. "Why'd you do this fool thing?"

"You'd have killed me anyhow," Ben said.

The real reason was his secret, to be cherished in his heart. He had proved to Tom and Gracie that he *did* love them. Memory of the tender warmth in Gracie's eyes would cheer him in the fearful days ahead. Ben smiled. He supposed he should be scared, but somehow now he had a backbone to bolster him. He turned away from the two tough convicts because they looked forlorn and pathetic and lost.

"If I catch you trying to sneak away from this camp, I'll still kill you," Cushner yelled after him, a trace of the old hardness in his voice.

"You won't do me a favor like that," Ben snapped. "The one who lives longest is the unlucky one now."

Cushner cursed hopelessly and, when Boder started to bluster, snarled him to silence. Ben walked into the desert until their voices were only a murmur, wanting to be alone with the strange new feeling of peace in his heart. He mounded sand for a pillow, then stretched out with the cool breeze on his face and watched the stars coming out.

He refused to think of the torturous days ahead. For the first time in years he felt as peaceful and contented as a child. Before they finished their lives here in the desert, the two convicts would be willing to spend the whole thirty thousand dollars for a single cup of water, but there would be no one to buy it

from. Ben's eyes grew heavy, and he dozed.

Once in the deep dark hours of the night he roused, and he thought he heard Carl Cushner crying, but decided he must be dreaming. He thought he was dreaming again in the early dawn when he felt firm fingers on his arm and looked up at Tom's blue eyes, his bandaged head, his big strong shoulders.

Tom's quick hand smothered his startled cry. "C'mon, Ben," Tom said, lips close to his ear, "before those other two wake up."

Still not daring to believe, Ben stumbled to his feet and was steadied by Tom's strong hands. His presence here, deep in the desert, was as unbelievable as if he'd risen suddenly out of the sand.

"How'd you get here?"

"Sh-h." Tom led the way to where two horses stood ground-hitched a safe distance from the camp. "You acted like most greenhorns do in the desert, Ben; you started moving in a big circle." Tom chuckled as he mounted. "I found your trail and had you three in sight most of the time. Toward dark I got worried we'd have you all back in time for supper!" Tom sobered suddenly, and his lips trembled. "I guess you know, Ben, that Gracie and I will be darn glad to get you back."

Still not sure he understood, Ben stayed silent. Then he stared at it in the distance, outlined clearly in the thin morning air—the thick clump of Spanish bayonet at the edge of the desert. And Tom's house was right beyond it!

"We'll have plenty of men on hand for those two when they wake up," Tom was saying. "I doubt if they've got much fight left in them anyway."

Ben ignored the words, unable to keep his eyes off the house looming steadily larger ahead. He wanted to say something, but he knew he couldn't trust his voice, stunned as he was by this mystery beyond his understanding. All the time that he had thought he was going deeper and deeper to his death in the desert, he had been moving closer and closer to home.

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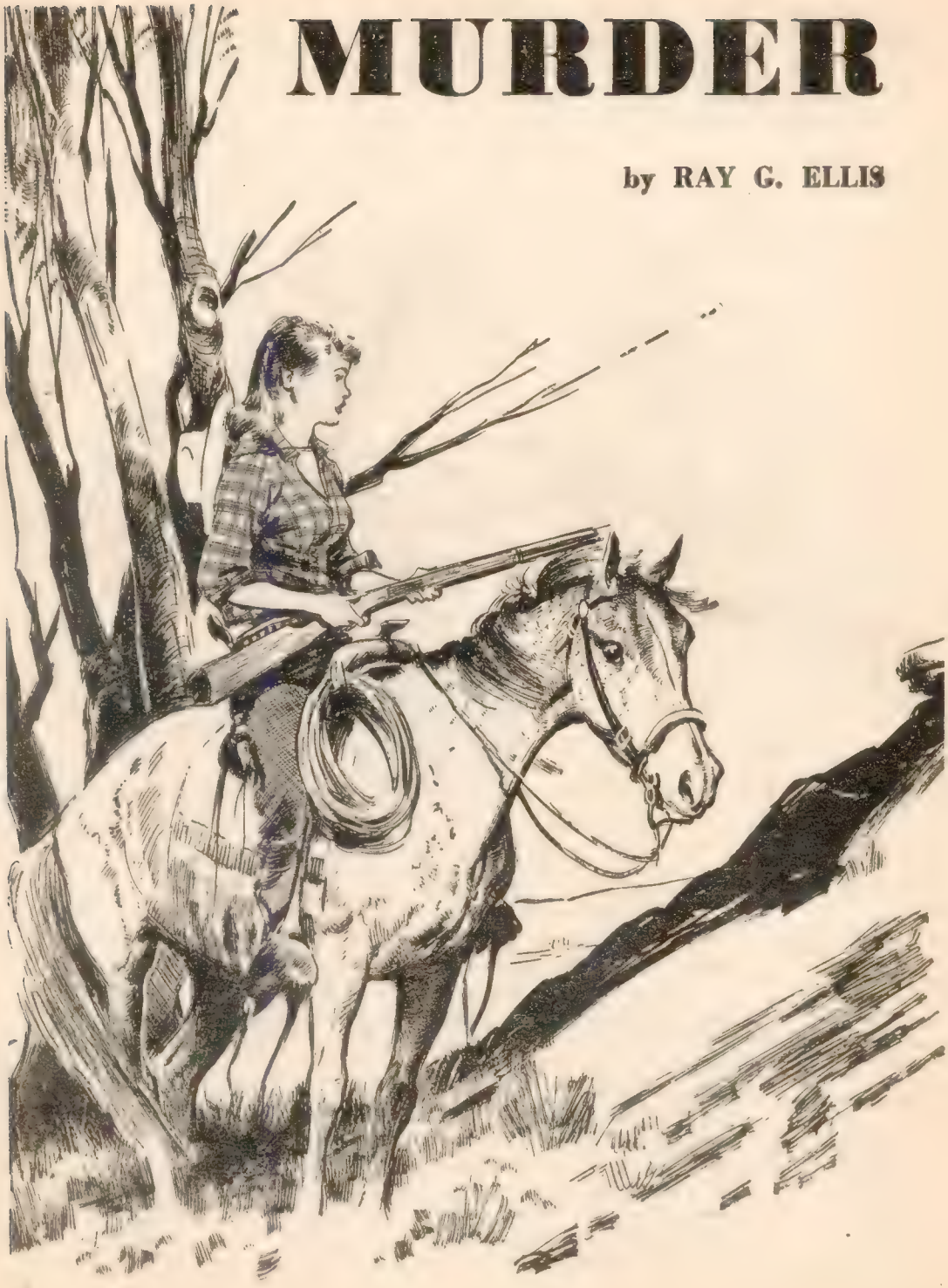
JOCK MAHONEY

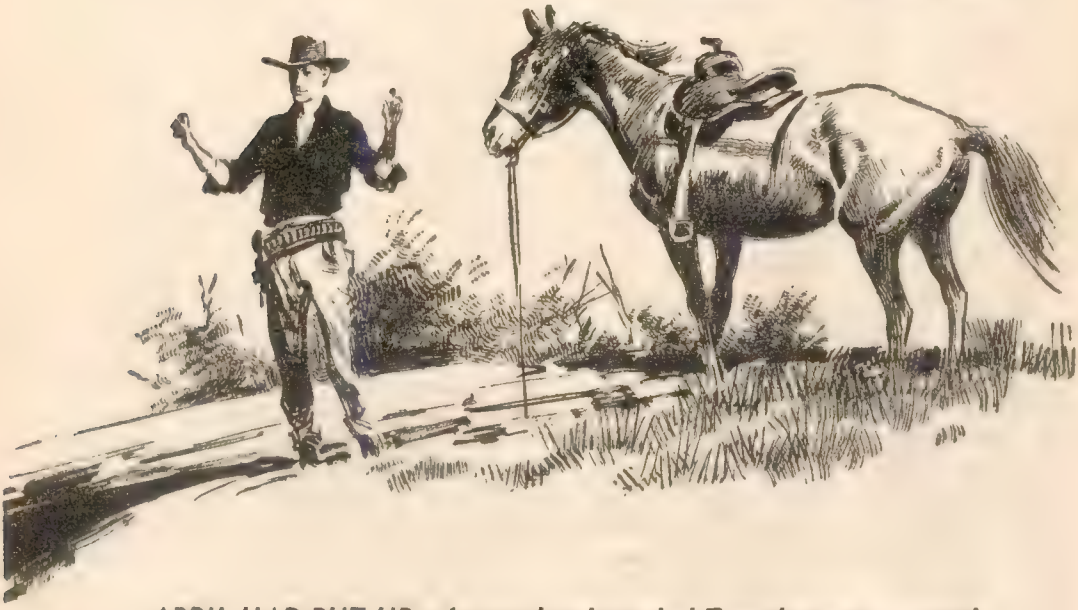
MURDER

by RAY G. ELLIS



RANGE

April held a rifle trained unwaveringly on Jed's chest.



APRIL HAD PUT UP a fence that kept Jed Temple away . . . and now he wondered if she were scheming to get rid of him for good

JED TEMPLE jerked his head up, suddenly alert. The faint, crisp crack of a rifle carried into the shallow depression where he was grazing a small bunch of cows to better pasture. The rifle sounded again and again, the shots evenly spaced as if somebody were target shooting. He reined about, rode to the top of the ridge, and pulled up there to listen again. The firing stopped.

Jed, his intense dark eyes squinted in a frown, debated with himself for a moment, then spurred his sorrel gelding in the direction from which the shots had come. He was a tall, slender man of twenty-eight, with a face burned brown from days and nights on the open range. Shy and ill at ease in a gathering, he was perfectly at home now as he rode toward the fence that divided his land from that of April Ballard's Box B spread.

The fence had been strung not more than a year and a half

ago, six months after Miss Ballard had bought her spread from an old rancher named Thompson. Jed had opposed the building of the fence, admittedly for selfish reasons. Cottonwood Creek was just on the other side of the fence, on the Ballard property. He and Thompson had shared the water during the years that they had been neighbors, but when the fence went up it reduced a strip of Jed's land to worthlessness, for his cattle could not graze that far from water.

Now he topped a low ridge and reined in, looking toward the fence and the tree-dotted course of the small stream. For a long moment he searched for signs of life, and saw none. But he saw something else that stirred violent emotion in him—dead cattle.

Across the fence and near the creek lay several brown-and-white humps of bone and flesh. Jed counted as many dead cows as he could see from his position. There were at least five.

It didn't make sense, nor could he figure how this might concern him. Yet a dark feeling ran through him, a warning that this might be a repetition of former trouble. He had spent two years behind bars for that other trouble, and even the thought that he might have to spend more time in prison was a frightening thing.

He put aside the desire to ride away from the scene. As a rancher he had a certain responsibility to investigate the shooting. He set off down the long slope toward the creek at a jog, lost in thought.

Dismounting at the fence, he spread the upper two strands of the three-strand wire and climbed through. A rifle cracked, and the bullet thunked into a fence post near his head as he was bending over. With a cry of anger and surprise, he ran for the cover of some willows along the creek.

He dove to the ground behind the willows, not knowing from which direction the shot had come. But it had sounded like a smaller bore rifle than that which had done the killing of the cattle.

He fingered the butt of the Colt pistol in the holster on his right hip, then drew his hand away again. There was no desire in him to shoot a woman, and he guessed that April Ballard had laid that shot alongside his head. He lay still and waited. A horse stepped noisily into gravel in the stream bed. Then he heard a woman's voice.

"Come out of there, Jed Temple." When he made no move, she said, "I'll rake that brush with lead if you don't step out with your hands in the air."

Knowing April as he did, Jed stepped out as she had ordered. She sat her horse, a small bay mare, in the middle of the stream, a rifle trained unwaveringly on Jed's chest.

April's blue eyes were the color of glacial ice, as she said, "What's the matter, Jed—did you get tired of looking at that fence?"

He studied her, noting the stiff straightness of her back, the tense lines of her face. Her nerves were strung tighter than the wire in her fence, and he knew it wouldn't take much to make her pull the trigger of her rifle.

He said, "You know better than that, April."

Prodding the mare, she moved closer. She was of medium height, and slender, but even the loose shirt she wore couldn't hide the gentle curves beneath it. A great, broad-brimmed hat covered her head, and from beneath it tumbled auburn hair. She wore levis and sat her saddle like a man. Jed knew she could ride as well as most men.

"*How* do I know better?" she asked sharply. "You've hated me and that fence ever since I put it up."

He studied the hard line of her lips as she spoke, remembering the one time he had kissed them. They were soft and yielding then. But that was a long time ago, before the fence had been put up.

"I never hated you, April," he said. "The fence, maybe, but not you."

She held the rifle on him, but made no move as he slowly let his weary arms drop. She said, "I put that fence up because I intend to make money out of the ranch. That water is mine, and I don't intend to give it to anybody that comes along. You've got water of your own, Jed Temple."

Her voice had taken on a defensive tone as she talked, and Jed grinned up at her. "It's your land, April," he said. "You can do what you like with it. But I still didn't shoot your cattle. You know me better than that."

"You were in prison for two years for steal-

ing horses," she said hotly. "A horse thief would be capable of anything."

THE words stung, and the grin faded from his lips. He took a step forward, but April tightened her grip on the gun. His voice was tight, harsh, when he spoke next.

"Dal Corde told you that," he said.

A tight smile touched her mouth, but there was no humor in it. She said, "You don't like the truth about yourself, do you?" She paused, then added, "Yes, Dal told me about it. He's my foreman; why shouldn't he? Everybody else on this range is so close mouthed they wouldn't talk if you had murdered somebody."

"Maybe *they* believe in giving a man another chance," he retorted angrily.

"Never give a horse thief a second chance."

They stared angrily at each other for a long moment. Then April spoke again. "I'll send you a bill for the cattle you killed," she told him. "I'll expect payment by the end of the month or the sheriff will hear about this."

"Don't be a fool, April. I didn't kill those cows. They were killed with a rifle, and I'm not carrying one."

Uncertainty leaped into her eyes for just a moment, and then was gone again. "You could have ditched it anywhere. I won't buy that."

Jed's own anger was rising at her unreasonableness. He sensed that, with another man, she would not have been so harsh. It was as if she were fighting him personally.

He told her, turning away, "I won't pay for the cows, so just forget about it."

It was with a tickling sensation in the middle of his back that he walked away from the rifle. April Ballard's temper lived up to what was expected of a redhead.

"Jed Temple, come back here," she ordered.

"Shoot me," he said over his shoulder, wondering at his own foolishness.

The rifle blasted and the bullet kicked up dirt at his feet. He kept walking toward his horse.

"You'll pay for those cows," she raged.

Again the rifle exploded, and again the dirt at Jed's feet kicked up, but this time the bullet whined off across the prairie. When he reached the fence, he hesitated.

April slammed the rifle into the saddle scabbard and reined about, choking back hot words and hotter tears. When she had recrossed Cottonwood Creek she sent the mare into a pounding run in the direction of her ranch headquarters.

Jed shrugged and climbed through the fence. After mounting, he headed back toward his own ranchhouse, pondering the morning's happenings. Worry lines etched themselves across his forehead as he rode over the rolling country.

Five years ago trouble had come just as suddenly and just as unexpectedly as this. But then it had been stolen horses, found in a branding pen he had built in a tiny, hidden meadow. The horses had evidently been there for several days, stolen from a man Jed was known to have had some harsh words with over the purchase of cattle.

Most people had been in sympathy with Jed, feeling that it was a mistake of youth. So the sentence had been just two years and, when he was released, the people of the range let him take up where he had left off, never mentioning his past to him.

But Jed had been just getting started with his ranch in those days, and he had not a cent to his name. He'd had to sell off most of his cattle to pay his lawyer. When he went to prison he had thought he would lose his ranch because he couldn't pay the taxes on it. But somebody, he had never found out who it was, had paid the taxes, so the ranch was still his when he returned from serving his sentence.

About a year after being released from prison, his neighbor, Thompson, had retired, selling out to April Ballard. Six months later she had built the fence between the two ranches, and Jed had seen little of her since then. He had met her when she first arrived, and had escorted her to several dances and church socials, but the fence had cut that off like a knife cutting string.

Now he rode into the yard of his ranch and dismounted before the roughly built house. Leaving the sorrel in the shade of a pin oak that stood before the house, he walked inside.

The house, a temporary, unpainted shack that had become permanent with the struggle of building up the ranch, was built on a small flat piece of ground in a narrow gully. The hills rose bleak and almost bare around it, but a tiny trickle in the gully provided water.

It was a small, crude, and functional layout. Jed regarded it honestly and knew it for nothing more than that. He had ambitions for a better house and outbuildings, but that would have to wait for the future.

As he entered the house, old Mustang Cohan looked around at him from the stove over which he stood stirring something in a pot. The shack was one large room. Across the room from the stove were two bunks built against the wall. A table with several rickety chairs around it stood in the center of the room. There was a stand with a porcelain washbowl on it and a small mirror over it. Except for clothes hanging from nails, this was all there was to the room.

Mustang said, "Sit down, Jed. I have dinner ready."

Jed poured water from a pitcher into the washbowl and washed his hands and face. Then he threw the water out the door and went back to the table. Mustang limped over with tin plates in one hand and a pot of stew in the other.

"What are you so glum about?" Mustang asked, as he put the plates on the table and began to ladle stew onto them.

"I just had a run-in with April Ballard."

Mustang's face cracked into a grin and he said, "Shouldn't think that'd bother a young buck like you."

"Somebody shot five cows over on Cottonwood Creek. She thinks I did it."

MUSTANG finshed ladling out the stew and put the pot back on the stove. He sat down at the table, the grin no longer on his face. Jed looked at the old timer. Mustang Cohan was a short, wiry little man of dubious vintage. White hair was thinning above his seamed forehead, but his eyes were still bright, sometimes mischievous. Jed had known him for as long as he could remember. Mustang had been a range rider all his life. Then a horse had fallen on him, and after that he couldn't ride very well.

During the time that Jed was in prison, Mustang had lived on the ranch, looking after things, although Jed hadn't know this until he returned from serving his sentence. The little man worked like a slave around the ranch, even though Jed had begged him more than once to slow down and take it easy.

"You reckon somebody's trying to make trouble for you again, Jed?" Mustang asked. Then he saw Jed's untouched stew and said, "Eat."

"I don't know," Jed said. "What's the object?"

"The same's last time."

Jed looked at Mustang quickly, getting a feeling that Mustang knew more about his first trouble than he had let on.

"How do you know I didn't steal those horses five years ago?" Jed asked.

Mustang looked up. "I've known you all your life," he said. "Don't you think I recognize a horse thief when I see one?"

Jed began to eat. Mustang's words sounded convincing enough, but still he had the feeling that something was being withheld from him.

"Dal Corde told April I spent time for horse stealing," Jed remarked.

Mustang slammed his fork down onto the table in sudden anger. This was something else that Jed didn't understand—Mustang's hatred of Dal Corde.

Mustang said, "That man is lower'n a snake's belly at the bottom of a well. Somebody ought to horsewhip him and run him out of the country."

Mustang glared across the table, and Jed said, "All right, old timer, simmer down. Corde's got as much right to live around here as you and me."

"Not in my book, he hasn't," Mustang commented, then lapsed into silence for the remainder of the meal.

It was some time after lunch that Jed heard the sound of hoofs on the hard ground. He was in the barn, greasing the wheels of the buckboard. When he went to the barn door he saw Sheriff Post rein around, from where he had stopped in front of the house, and ride toward him.

The sheriff was rail thin, a man in his forties. A wide, sweeping mustache his pride and joy adorned his upper lip. Usually an easy-going man, when on the prod he was a mean one to buck. Jed took one look at the scowl on Post's face and knew the sheriff was on the prod now.

Post rode up and dismounted, his right hand never straying far from the pistol on his right

April looked so small and helpless that Jed's anger quickly melted away

hip. He regarded Jed in silence for a moment, then said, "Do you know what I'm here for, Temple?"

"I can guess."

"All right, then. It's those cows you killed over on Cottonwood. That was a damn fool stunt if I ever saw one."

Jed picked up a handful of straw from the floor of the barn and began to wipe the grease from his hands. He said, "I'd agree, if I'd done it, Sheriff."

Post looked doubtful. "You'll have to ride into Laird with me. I aim to hold you till I can investigate the whole thing."

Jed sighed. The temptation to draw on Post was strong—not to shoot him, but to get the drop on him and run off. He figured that being framed once was plenty for any man. But he knew he couldn't draw. It would make him a hunted man, a real law-breaker.

"All right, Sheriff," he muttered.

A short time before, Jed had turned the sorrel into the small pole corral near the barn. Now he roped it and saddled up again. He was about to climb in the saddle when Mustang appeared at one corner of the barn with a rifle in his hand. It was pointed at Sheriff Post.

"Do you have a warrant, Sheriff?" Mustang asked.

Post twisted in the saddle and stared down at the gun in Mustang's hands. "Put that down, you old fool. No, I don't have a warrant."

"Then he doesn't have to go with you," Mustang said in triumph, lowering the gun.

Post looked at Jed and said, "Do you want me to ride into Laird and get one?"

Jed shook his head. "I reckon not. You're bound and determined to take me in, and it might as well be now as then."

He was swinging into the saddle when Mustang said, "Why don't you ask Dal Corde about those cattle, sheriff? That man is mean enough to do anything."

"I aim to talk to him, and to Jed, and maybe to some others. Meanwhile I want Jed in jail where I can keep an eye on him."

"You've never forgotten that I spent time, have you, Post?" Jed asked.

"It seems as if maybe you forgot," Post told him, reining about.

Jed shrugged and rode past the house onto the trail toward Laird, eight miles to the south.

IT WASN'T until the next afternoon that Sheriff Post strode again into his office. It was a small room, with one wall made up of the two steel cages that served as cells. Laird was off the beaten track, a lazy cowtown that had little use for a jail.

Post walked to Jed's cell, keys jangling in his hands. He announced, "Your visit's over, Temple."

When he had unlocked the door, he drew it open and stood holding onto it as Jed walked out. Jed said, "Don't think your hospitality hasn't been appreciated, sheriff—because it hasn't." His voice grew bitter. "You gave me a rotten deal because of my past record. Maybe now you're satisfied."

Post gave the cell door a shove and it shut with a crash. "No, I'm not satisfied, but I have no choice. I couldn't dig up enough evidence against you. Mustang Cohan swore to me this morning that you rode out without a rifle, and those cows were killed with a .44-40."

"I could tell that by the sound of the gunshot," Jed said. He went to the door of the jail office, feeling anger mixed with disgust. He turned at the door and said, "I was framed once, but I won't be again. I aim to find out what's going on."

Post held up one hand and said cajolingly, "Don't go getting yourself in trouble, Temple. The law will take care of its own business."

Jed left the office without another word, pulling the door shut hard behind him. It wasn't until he was on the trail back to his ranch that he began to cool off. While anger was riding high within him, he knew he would not be able to act with any sense. He fought it down by telling himself that Sheriff Post had acted in the only way he knew how.

By the time Jed rode into the yard of his ranch headquarters, he was cooled down to the point where he could think. And with his thinking came discouragement, for he knew how slim his chances were of finding out who had shot the Box B cows. If it had been meant to look as if he, Jed, had done it, then there was sure to be more trouble in the offering, too.

Mustang was not in the house when Jed entered. He sliced bread from a loaf that Mustang had baked that morning, and spread strawberry preserves on it. Munching on this, he went to the barn. But Mustang was not there either.

"The hardworking fool won't ever give up," Jed muttered to himself. "He's probably out riding somewhere."

But Mustang's horse was still in the corral. Jed leaned against the poles of the corral and finshed the bread and jam. Then he rolled a quirly and lit it. Behind the house, dug into the hillside, was a root cellar where they kept their perishables. Sometimes Mustang went there on a hot day, to cool off while peeling potatoes for the next meal. Jed walked around to the cellar and pulled open the door.

It was dark inside, and he was about to close it up again when he caught sight of a vague outline on the floor of the cellar. He went in, his eyes now growing accustomed to the dark, and he knelt beside Mustang. The little cowpuncher was dead, shot through the back of the head.

Staring down at his dead friend, Jed felt anger grow inside him, anger at things that were beyond his control. He got to his feet and went outside, trying to fight down his rage. Not since he was a child, when his father had died, had he felt such helpless anger.

He thought of taking Mustang's body into Laird, then discarded the idea. Post would arrest him again and hold him, this time for murder. So he buried Mustang on the hill

behind the house. With two small boards he made a crude cross and put it over the grave, piling rocks around it. Then he recited the Lord's Prayer as he remembered it from his childhood.

The anger that he had suppressed during the burial rose as he walked back toward the house. It grew until it was an unreasonable rage, blotting out all sense of reason. Moving toward the sorrel, he touched the pistol he wore.

After swinging into the saddle, he raked the animal with his spurs and left the yard at a dead run. All the way to April Ballard's ranch headquarters, all he could think of was the offer she had made to buy his ranch several months before. When he had refused, she had ridden off in anger.

The Ballard place was set at the edge of a green meadow. As Jed approached, the white paint of the house gleamed through the trees. Some distance behind the house stood a huge red barn. Fencing enclosed the whole yard and it, too, was painted white. It was a neat, business-like layout.

Jed reined in, swinging out of the saddle and flipping the reins about the rail in front of the white picket fence. His face was flushed from hard riding and from the core of anger that lay in him like a rock. The front door to the house stood open, for it was a warm day.

Jed charged up onto the porch and shouted through the screen, "April. April Ballard."

Footsteps thudded dully on the carpeting inside, and then April faced him through the screen. "Jed, what's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" he raged. "I'll tell you what's the matter. Mustang's been murdered—shot through the head while I was in jail because of you."

April paled. It was a moment before she spoke; then she said in a whisper, "And you think I did that?"

"You wanted to buy me out, didn't you?" Jed demanded. "With the reputation I have around here, you know it wouldn't take much to get rid of me."

As he said the words, Jed began to realize how foolish they sounded. The anger drained from him slowly, bringing him to his senses. How could he ever have thought that April was capable of such a thing? And in that moment he realized he loved her, and had since the first time they'd met. The fence April had built had become a wall between them, holding them apart, but it had not killed his love for her.

But as anger left him, it grew in April. The first shock of hearing about Mustang's murder had worn off, and now her eyes snapped with fury.

"Get out," she ordered. "Get off my land, Jed Temple, or there'll be another murder."

"April, I—"

A form loomed up behind April. It was Dal Corde. He said, "You heard her, Temple. Get the hell out."

JED stared past April at the big man, remembering Mustang's inexplicable hate for him.

"We're waiting, Temple," Corde said.

Jed looked once more at April's set countenance. With a shrug, he turned and left the porch, walking back to the sorrel at the rail. He had one foot in the stirrup when Corde's heavy voice stopped him. He turned and saw Corde coming toward him from a door at the side of the house. Jed frowned and waited.

Corde walked heavily. He was a large man, nearing forty, and fat was beginning to cover the corded muscles that had once stood out in hard ridges. He had small eyes and a nose that had been flattened in some long-ago fight. Jed didn't know the man very well, and didn't like what he knew.

"I wanted to talk to you, Temple," Corde said, moving up to the picket fence that stood between them.

Jed waited in silence, one hand resting on the pommel of his saddle.

"I couldn't help but hear about old Mustang," Corde went on. "I was mighty sorry about that."

"You sound like it, Corde," Jed rasped. "Mustang hated you worse than poison. How come you're so damn sorry about it?"

Corde's voice hardened as he said, "All right, forget about that. If I were you I'd be lighting out for parts unknown."

Jed got the drift of the conversation then and said, "You want to buy my spread, is that what you're getting at?"

Corde nodded, a mirthless smile touching the corners of his heavy lips. "You haven't much choice, Temple. I'll give you three thousand cash."

Jed turned away, saying, "Don't be a fool, Corde. The place is worth twice that."

He put his foot back into the stirrup, but Corde's heavy grasp on his arm stopped him from mounting. Corde, leaning over the fence, said, "It might be worth six thousand to a man who isn't in trouble with the law. But to a man who isn't staying around to hang, I'd think three thousand would look good."

Jed cut down with the edge of his palm, knocking Corde's hand away. "I'm not running, and I'm not hanging," he said. "I aim to find out what this is about."

Corde swung heavily, suddenly, his massive fist catching Jed high on the head, knocking him back against his horse. The blow had been unlooked for, and for a moment Jed tottered there, half stunned.

Corde stepped away from the fence that stood between them. Jed came forward, vaulting over the pickets. As he hit the ground Corde charged him, but Jed stepped aside, jabbing. He caught the big man on the cheekbone with his knuckles, and saw the flesh split open.

Corde turned and came back, slower this time, like an angry bull in a ring, moving his head from side to side. He swung roundhouse, using his arm as a club. The blow slid off Jed's shoulder and slammed into his ear. Jed countered hard lefts and rights, moving his attack from Corde's face to his body and back again.

Corde had put on flesh, but underneath it the muscles were still hard. He kept moving in, clubbing at Jed with his fists. He caught Jed above the heart and Jed felt pain shoot through his chest.

It was painful then to throw his left hand, and he had to use it mostly for blocking blows. Corde saw his advantage and grunted in triumph, moving in faster than before.

Jed backed and found he was against the fence. Corde pressed in, a savage smile on his lips now. He swung hard and Jed ducked the blow, sliding away from the fence. When Corde turned, Jed swarmed over him, forgetting the pain in his chest. He slashed at Corde's heavy face, cutting it until it was covered with blood. He shifted his attack to the body and Corde began to sag.

"Stop it," April screamed at them.

Corde backed against the fence and leaned on it, drawing in great gulps of air through bloody lips. Jed turned and saw that April had trained her rifle on him.

She said, "I told you to get out, Jed Temple, and I meant it."

Her eyes flicked toward Corde, and Jed turned. The foreman was fumbling with his gun, trying to draw it from the holster at his side. He got it clear and brought it up unsteadily, aiming at Jed. Jed stepped in, lashing out with a right. It caught Corde flush on the chin and he fell sideways to the ground and lay still.

The muzzle of April's rifle caught Jed in the back as she jabbed at him with it. He whirled, catching it in one hand and shoving it away from him. He glared down at her, and suddenly she was crying. Her eyes filled and overflowed. She looked so small and helpless that Jed's anger left him and he longed to draw her to him, to comfort her.

He put his hands on her shoulders and moved close to her. "April."

"No, Jed," she said sharply, moving away from him.

He let his arms drop and looked at her. The tears had stopped and she looked at the ground between them, her face sad.

"Please go," she said quietly. "You've caused enough trouble for one day. Maybe it wasn't all your fault; I don't know. But it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't come."

He turned away, going through the gate and to his horse. He swung into the saddle, then looked down at Corde, who was beginning to stir.

"Get some of your crew to take care of him," Jed said. "Cold water will bring him out of it."

When she said nothing, he reined about and rode away from the house. Weariness came over him as he slowly relaxed on the ride back to his ranch. The memory of the fight was already settling into the back of his mind, but the memory of April under his touch was still fresh and strong.

HE REALIZED that he had been a proud fool when he let the fence she had built stand between them. It would save money at roundup time, she had told him for they wouldn't have to spend time cutting out each other's cows. And she had been right.

Still, he had the feeling that, in spite of her ideas, the job she had taken was too big for her. Running a ranch and handling the men was a man's job; there was no getting around that fact. But she had done remarkably well at it, and he had to give her due credit.

He rode slowly, dismounting at the fence to open the gate and lead the sorrel through. Now he was on his own property, and he remounted. There would be no Mustang to greet him and the thought of this was painful. He had grown close to the older man during their three-year association on the ranch. He realized then that he didn't want to go back to the ranch—not right away.

Several cottonwoods dotted the course of a tiny stream some distance away, and Jed rode toward the trees. He dismounted in the shade and sat down, leaving the sorrel ground hitched.

His thoughts slid back over past events, and he looked for a pattern there. After some thinking he concluded that the only pattern was the fact that somebody was trying to get rid of him, and had been for years.

Again he had the feeling that Mustang Cohan fit into the thing somewhere. He hadn't really known Mustang very well before he had gone away to prison—at least no better than he had known a hundred other people. So why had Mustang taken care of the ranch for him? And who had paid the taxes all that time? It didn't seem likely that Mustang could have paid the taxes, for he had barely scraped out a living on the ranch since Jed had been forced to sell all but a few head of cattle.

This was the first time he had really thought over this part of his past; before he had wanted to forget it. But now an idea came to him and he got to his feet, his weariness forgotten. He mounted up and pointed the sorrel east, setting out at a fast pace toward Ness City, the county seat. It had just occurred to him that the county clerk might be able to tell him who had made the tax payments.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he reached the county seat. The courthouse, a wooden structure, stood in the center of a group of buildings, baking in the afternoon sun. He rode through the nearly deserted streets, passing a group of loafers in the shade of a sidewalk awning. They stared at him, and one man nodded. He rode on and dismounted in front of the courthouse, leaving the sorrel at the rail.

The clerk's office was in the basement of the building. He went down the short flight of steps. A sign lettered on the door told him which office to enter, and he went in. The clerk was a little gnome of a man, bent, wrinkled, ageless. He peered at Jed through steel-rimmed glasses. A high counter divided the room, and Jed stopped at this.

"You the clerk?" he asked the old man.

"I'm James J. Agnew, and I've been clerk of Ness County for ten years," he said.

"I'd like some information. I'm trying to find out who paid the taxes on the Jed Temple property four years ago."

Agnew scratched his thin hair and said, "Well, now, why don't you ask Mr. Temple?"

"That's me," Jed told him.

Agnew shook his head, went to a shelf at the far end of the room, and drew down a large book. He began to thumb through it, licking his thumb every few pages. Finally he stopped turning pages and squinted at some writing. Lifting the book with an effort, he brought it over to the counter and put it before Jed.

"That's a copy of the receipt I gave the gent," he said. "My writing isn't much good but it looks like I wrote William R. Cohon, or Cohan."

Jed barely glanced at the book. He knew Mustang's real first name was William, and the rest was enough like it so that he was certain Mustang had paid the taxes. But with what? And why? For all Mustang knew, he, Jed, might kick him off the place when he returned from prison.

"Are you going to stare at that writing all day?" Agnew asked.

Jed looked up blankly, then turned away. He was at the door before he remembered to say, "Much obliged, old timer."

He left Ness City at a jog, letting the horse

pick its own pace. During the ride, questions kept nagging at him, but he found no answers. A short distance from Laird he left the trail he had been following and cut across country. Sheriff Post probably had a warrant out for his arrest by this time.

The country grew rougher, turning into barren hills, cut and gouged by erosion until it was almost badlands country. He crossed over the low divide of these hills and began to descend. This was his own range now.

Dusk was turning to night when he came upon the old branding pen that he had built many years before. It was still standing, although he hadn't used it since returning from prison. It lay before him as he reached the crest of a small hill. There he stopped, staring in amazement. It was filled with horses.

He sent his horse down the slope into the meadow, drawing up beside the pole fence. In the dim light he made out several brands that he recognized, among them April Ballard's Box B. This was another stolen horse frame-up. His anger rose.

A gun exploded from nearby rocks, and the bullet ripped a furrow across Jed's chest. He dropped from the sorrel, ignoring the burning pain that the bullet had left.

USING the sorrel as a shield, he began to move away from the pen, hoping to reach the protection of a pile of boulders nearby. But when he had cleared the pen, another rifle sounded, this time from the opposite side of the small clearing. The shot missed and Jed had to run for it. He dove into the rocks as a third shot whined angrily over his head.

Darkness was coming on fast. That made his own position safer, but it also would make it harder for him to get a good look at his attackers. He moved around the rocks until he had a view of the tiny meadow. Nothing stirred. He shifted his gaze to the pile of rocks from which the first shot had come. There was nothing there, either.

So he waited, staring into the darkening meadow until his eyes began to play tricks on him. How long he waited he didn't know. But he heard the sound of shifting gravel behind him, and came out of his weary stupor with a jerk. Twisting around, he saw a dark shape on the hillside above him, about twenty feet away.

The pistol in his hand spoke savagely, its flame burning into the darkness, blinding Jed for an instant. When he looked again, he saw the man take another step, then pitch forward, the rifle in his hands firing into the air. The dark form hit the gravelly hillside and slid down toward him, stopping a few feet away.

"You all right, Talley?" somebody shouted from some distance away.

"No, he's dead," Jed answered, and smiled grimly when he heard the man curse. He edged up the hill toward the still form above him, hoping the darkness would cover his movements. When he reached the man, he rolled him over, staring at the face. He recognized him as one of April's crew.

In another quarter of an hour it was completely dark in the clearing, and Jed began to make his way down to his mount. He had seen enough, and what he had seen made him sick. He found the sorrel near the pen, and mounted up. Trusting to the horse's good eyesight, he sent the animal into motion. He himself could see nothing in the thick gloom. The pound of the horse's hoofs filled the small clearing.

Somebody shouted, "He's getting away."

Two rifles, one on each side of the clearing, blasted, but he was gone before they could find him. There had been at least three men around the pen. Jed guessed that he must have caught them just as they finished driving the horses in.

Some time later, he rode into his ranch headquarters. Wearily, he off saddled the tired sorrel and put it out to pasture. When he stepped into the house he expected, for a moment, to hear Mustang greet him. But, of course, that would never happen again. Even before he had rustled himself something to eat, he heard the sound of a horse outside. Blowing out the lamp, he waited in the darkness.

Through a window he saw the horse and rider, a dark shadowy form, stop at the rail. Then the rider called toward the house, "All right, Temple, I saw the light. This is Sheriff Post. Come out with your hands up."

Jed holstered the pistol in his hand and relit the lamp. He went to the doorway of the cabin, holding the light before him.

"Come on in, sheriff," he called. "I'm getting something to eat. I have a few things to tell you."

Post dismounted and moved warily toward the cabin. "Don't try anything, Temple," he warned.

Jed chuckled and led Post into the room. While he ate cold beans and bread, Post questioned him about Mustang's murder, and Jed told him all he knew. Dal Corde had ridden into town and had told the sheriff that Jed had come to Box B, threatening April and himself.

"From the looks of Corde's face," the sheriff said, "I'd say you did a good deal more than threaten."

Jed grunted and continued to eat. When he had finished he rolled a smoke and said, "Mustang paid the taxes on my spread while I was in prison, Sheriff. Do you have any idea why he might do that?"

Post's thin face showed amazement. He shook his head. "Everybody wondered how you held onto the place, Temple," he said. "That's why some still hold to the belief that you did steal those horses, and that they weren't the first."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know what to think," Post told him. "You don't look like a horse thief. You've always been honest as far as I know."

"Then what would you say if I told you there are some more stolen horses in the same pen?"

Post leaned forward across the table. "What!" he said in a near shout.

Jed nodded. "I happened to ride past there on my way back from Ness City. I got shot at for my trouble."

Post leaned back in the chair, looking doubtful. "What are you doing, Temple, telling me this so you'll look innocent?"

Anger grew in Jed, anger at being doubted every time he opened his mouth. He got to his feet, shucking his jacket. The front of his shirt was stiff with dried blood, but he ripped it open, showing the furrow the bullet had made across his chest.

"You think I did that so I'd look innocent?" he asked hotly.

Post got to his feet, saying, "Good heavens, man. You get into town to Doc Lowden."

Jed went to the wall and pulled another shirt off a nail. When he had buttoned it on, he said, "I'm going through Mustang's things while you're here, sheriff. If I find something I want you to be a witness. You'd never believe me if you didn't see it with your own eyes."

"But what about that wound?"

"Never mind that," Jed told him shortly.

He went to Mustang's bunk and drew a small chest from beneath it. In all the time he and Mustang had lived together he had never seen the old man open the chest. It wasn't locked, and he lifted the lid.

IT WAS less than half full of personal effects—a neckerchief, an old pistol, and a few faded pictures. In one corner, folded into a small bundle, was one page of an old newspaper. It was yellow and brittle with age. Jed unfolded it carefully.

It was the front page of a paper. Across the top in dark letters it read, "Hill City Clarion." It was dated seven years before. Jed studied the paper, and said to Post, "Mustang told me he used to live up around Hill City."

Near the bottom of the sheet was a small article that caught Jed's eye. He studied the article closely for some time before he handed it to Post. It read:

RELEASE PRISONERS FOR LACK OF EVIDENCE

The three prisoners being held in the jailhouse of our fair city were released today. Sheriff Nolton told this reporter that he was forced to act because of lack of evidence. It is hoped that the men, if innocent of the crime, will not bear a grudge against our town. If they are guilty, then it is hoped that they will take their nefarious deeds elsewhere. Next time they might not be so lucky. The men were listed as Sam Turrin, Dal Corde and Wm. "Mustang" Cohan. They were being held on suspicion of stealing houses from nearby ranches.

Post read the article, then handed the paper back to Jed. He said, "Looks like you were harboring a horse thief and didn't know it."

"But that isn't what's important," Jed said, excited now. "Dal Corde drifted into Laird right after this happened. He made me an offer for my spread back then. When I

wouldn't sell, he framed me with that horse-stealing charge."

Post shook his head. "That doesn't hold water, Temple. Cohan was in cahoots with Corde, if what that paper says is true."

"Listen, sheriff," Jed said, his voice intense. "I've known Mustang just about all my life. Maybe he wasn't always honest; I don't know. But I do know he was a cut above Dal Corde. He and Corde must have had a falling out right after they were released from the Hill City jail. Then, when Corde pulled the frame on me, Mustang probably guessed who did it and felt partly guilty. That was why he tried to square things by paying my taxes. He undoubtedly paid them out of his own pocket."

"I don't know, Temple," Post said. "It sounds pretty thin to me."

"Thin, hell," Jed exclaimed, his voice rising. "What do you want, Sheriff, a signed confession?"

"Then you're saying that April Ballard is in cahoots with Dal Corde. They're working together now, and you know that before she bought out Thompson she had a small outfit up around Hill City."

The elation at having found out who was behind all the things that had been happening drained from Jed. He felt as if he had been sandbagged by Post's words. He shook his head and stared at the floor.

"You told me yourself when you were cooling your heels in jail the other day that April Ballard had made you an offer for this layout," Sheriff Post reminded him.

Jed's voice was weak when he said, "Then you think April's part of this?"

"No," Post said, drawing his pistol. "That's why I'm taking you back into town until I find out what's going on."

You don't think she's part of this, Jed thought sickly, but I do. For a moment he felt like giving up without a struggle. With Mustang dead and now April, the one person he loved, suspected of being in cahoots with Dal Corde, it seemed to him that there was not much reason to care any more.

But then he realized that Post was doing exactly what April and Dal Corde hoped he would do—take Jed into jail. More evidence against him would be easy to plant then. Something inside him rebelled.

Post, thinking that he had Jed well covered, was not expecting Jed's next move. Post was only a step away and Jed moved in fast, slapping at the pistol in Post's hand. The jolt of the quick blow set off the gun, but it fired into the wall.

He grabbed Post's wrist with both hands and tried to shake the pistol loose. When the sheriff wouldn't let go, he pulled the lighter man after him to the table and slammed his wrist against the edge. The gun clattered to the floor.

Picking the pistol up, Jed said, "Sorry to do that, Sheriff, but I had no choice. With me in jail, Box B could do just what they wanted to."

Jed moved to the door, covering Post, who stood where Jed had left him, rubbing his wrist. "I'm taking your horse," he told the lawman. "But there are others in the corral, and a saddle in the shed you're welcome to use. I'll leave your gun by the gate."

Post spoke then, his voice brittle. "You're taking the law into your own hands, Temple. If you kill anybody, you'll hang."

"Not if that somebody is a horse thief and a murderer, sheriff," Jed said.

He backed out the door, then turned and ran for the sheriff's horse at the rail. He vaulted into the saddle and left the yard on the run, dropping Post's pistol on the ground before he left. When he looked back he saw Post standing in the doorway, a dark silhouette.

The horse under him was a big gray gelding that ate up the miles effortlessly. When he reached Box B headquarters there was a light in the house. He dismounted and ran to the porch, taking the steps two at a time. Through an open window he saw April sitting near a lamp, sewing.

THE sight of her calmness in the midst of all the trouble that was around him built a fire under his temper. Without knocking, he jerked open the door and went into the room. April dropped her sewing and stared at him open mouthed.

"Jed, what in the world are you doing?" she asked in a startled voice. She rose to her feet and came toward him.

He watched her, trying to build a wall

around himself against her, to cut off all feeling for her. It was hard to do.

"I'm sorry about the fight today, Jed," she told him. "I didn't know what I was doing, running you off at gunpoint like that."

He looked down at her, searching for hot, angry words. When they didn't come, he wondered if he were weakening. This idea kindled his anger again.

Her eyes dropped to the front of his shirt and she exclaimed, "You've been hurt."

He looked down and saw that the shallow wound had started to bleed slightly after the exertion of his ride. He said harshly, "You ought to know about that. Or hasn't Dal gotten back yet?"

"Yes, he's here. But I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then maybe you don't known anything about the horses I found up in the branding pen." The words flowed from him now. April stood staring at him, a look of horror on her face. "There were some of your horses in the bunch, too," he went on. "But then there would be, wouldn't there—so that you would be clear of suspicion?"

"Jed, stop it," April cried. "Have you gone out of your head?"

"I was pretty crazy, but I'm not now," he said. "I found out that you and Dal Corde both came from Hill City. It got too hot for him there, so he left. Then you followed."

April's eyes widened. She laid a hand on his arm and her voice pleaded when she said, "Listen to me just a minute, Jed." He drew his arm away from her touch but remained silent. She went on:

"Of course I came here from Hill City. Does that make me a criminal? I was trying to raise horses there, but so many were stolen that I had to sell out. I suspected Dal of it but I couldn't prove it. I even had him jailed, but there wasn't enough evidence. I taught school for several years after that. When I came down here and bought out Thompson, Dal asked for a job and I gave it to him, hoping to keep an eye on him. But after nearly two years I hadn't found out anything, I thought I was wrong the first time. Now it looks like I wasn't wrong, after all."

Jed stared at her, wanting to believe her yet still confused, doubtful. "If all that's true, then why did you call me a horse thief?"

"I was angry, Jed," she said, "and I had lost several good horses besides. I thought maybe you were working with Dal."

She came close to him and this time he reached out for her, feeling the wall between them crumble. Then another voice cut the stillness, and they both turned to face Dal Corde.

"She told you the truth, Temple," Corde said, holding a pistol steady on Jed. "Take his gun, April, and throw it on the floor."

When the girl hesitated, Corde growled, "Go on if you want him alive."

As she reached for the gun at Jed's hip he grabbed for her, pulling her down toward the floor and kicking at the table with the lamp on it at the same time. The lamp fell over with a crash and went out, oil spreading across the floor. Corde's gun roared, the bullet taking the glass from a window directly behind Jed.

Jed crawled across the floor away from April, making plenty of noise so that Corde would not think he was still near the girl. Corde fired into the room in the direction of the noise, barely missing Jed.

Jed said, "You wanted my place mighty bad, Corde. Why?"

The big man sent another shot crashing at Jed's voice, but this time he misjudged the direction. Then he said, "Where's a better place to hide stolen horses? With all those badlands, it would take a man a month to find anything there."

Jed moved slowly, silently, to his left. He wanted to take Corde alive to prove once and for all that he was innocent. He said, "Mustang threatened to talk, didn't he? That's why you killed him."

Corde fired again, ripping plaster from the wall several inches from Jed's head. "That's right, and you'll get the same thing, Temple," he howled, firing again. But Jed had moved.

A horse pounded up in front of the house. A moment later footsteps sounded on the porch and Jed shouted, "Don't come in, Sheriff. I've got a wild man in here."

But the sheriff jerked open the door. "I'm coming after you, Temple. You're under arrest for resisting an officer."

Corde fired again, this time at the sheriff's

outline. The lawman cried out as the bullet caught him. Jed, giving up on the idea of taking Corde alive, squeezed off a shot, firing slightly behind the flash of Corde's gun. Corde grunted, and Jed fired again. Corde dropped heavily to the floor and lay still.

"You all right, April?" Jed asked, getting to his feet.

"I guess so. I'll find a lamp." She moved across the dark room and ran into Jed. His arms folded around her, and he kissed her.

When they broke apart she said, "I've waited a long time for that. Every time I saw you I was hoping you'd speak, and you never did."

"I know," he told her softly. "I was a stubborn fool."

From the direction of the front door, Sheriff Post said, "Hey, don't mind me. I'm just lying here dying while you two are making up for lost time."

Jed said, "I forgot all about you, Sheriff. April, where's that lamp?"

She got it, and Jed fished out a match and lit it. One glance at Corde told Jed that the horse thief was dead. He went to Sheriff Post. The sheriff sat leaning against the door jamb, his right hand clamped tight about his left foream. Jed saw that the wound was small, and he grinned. Post looked up at him and scowled.

"What are you grinning at, Temple? That ornery critter damn near took my arm off with that cannon of his," Post complained.

April moved up beside Jed and said, "How would you like to come to a big wedding, Sheriff?"

Post got to his feet, muttering. Jed said, "You can be my best man."

The scowl dropped from Post's face. "I'm not going to get any sympathy here," he said. Then he added, "All right, I'll come to your wedding and be your best man. Now do I get some bandages for this arm?"

"You sure do, Sheriff," April said, but she was looking up at Jed, her eyes sparkling.

DRUGSTORE COWBOY

By PHIL SQUIRES

A drugstore cowboy is a guy
With cowboy clothes and boots on,
Who maybe drinks the same red-eye
That cowpokes shine their snoots on;

Who likes a cowtown street to show
His riggin' off and idle on,
But of a horse don't even know
Which end to put the bridle on!

Cal said, "I reckon I'll be going away tomorrow."

FIDDLEFOOT BLUES

By JANE L. BRANCH

AT THE top of the pass Calvin Fife stopped his horse and gazed reluctantly across Grass Valley. He was obliged to call on a girl he had never seen, and he had no desire at all to go through with the meeting.

He shifted his lanky body in the saddle and grunted as pain clawed at ribs that hadn't yet healed properly. If he and Billy Lowry hadn't tangled with those mule skinners two weeks ago, he wouldn't be here alone; he'd be with Billy, scouting the Seminoles, seeing what there was to see beyond the next hill.

Maybe Billy had changed his plans and was already at the girl's place, Calvin thought hopefully, and he could talk his partner into forgetting her for good.

Billy should have stopped thinking about her years ago, Cal told himself fretfully. A man with an itchy foot should think only of his tomorrows, not his yesterdays. Billy knew this, but he hadn't been able to get this

CAL FIFE HAD no wife . . . and he sure enough wasn't going to get one if he could help it

Melody Jarman out of his mind. He had mentioned her every so often in a sorrowful sort of way, like a man might recall the days of his boyhood. That's what had happened two months ago, when they'd drifted west after wintering in Laramie.

"I sure enough have a hankering to see Melody," Billy had said. "After all, we grew up together, and when I left the valley two-three years ago I promised that one day I'd come back and settle down."

Cal stared. "You mean you figure to get hitched?"

"I reckon so," Billy said. "Melody and her father have a homestead, and there's spring plowing to think about. Her father being a naturally lazy cuss, she's bound to need help around the place."

"You didn't worry about her needing help last spring," Cal objected.

"Last spring we were drifting through Arizona," Billy reminded him. "No, Cal, I've been gone too long as it is, and I'm feeling mighty guilty about it."

For all that he was grim with purpose, Billy seemed the least bit reluctant, and Cal knew why. They had drifted together a long time, and Billy hated to break up their partnership. Cal felt the same way.

He said sadly, "How long'll it take us to get to this valley?"

"Four-five days, but there's no need to hurry," Billy said. Then he brightened. "Maybe you'll find a gal, too, and settle down, and we could be neighbors."

"Good heavens, no!" Cal said. He didn't believe in married bliss and the long, steady haul. He had felt the lure of too many distant hills ever to get caught in one place longer than it took him to earn a stake. Beyond where the eye could reach lay new country, and just the thought of it made his feet itch.

As Billy had said, there was no need to hurry, so twice they followed trails away from their destination, telling each other there might be something over that way they couldn't afford to miss. Then, since it was roundup time, they put in a month at a big ranch, Billy saying he didn't want to go home broke. They collected their wages and were in town having a drink, when Billy got into a scrap with the three mule skinners.

It had been Billy's fault. He'd been on edge, balky as a wild steer. Right or wrong, though, Cal backed his partner, and when the dust settled he learned that two of his ribs had parted company, and that it would be at least a week before he could sit a saddle.

"You might as well go on ahead," he told Billy. "But I'll stop by and meet the bride when I'm up and around."

"I hate to go on alone," Billy said, and squinted through swollen eyes as though he were gazing at distant horizons. "I think I'll sort of drift toward the Seminoles after all, since this'll be my last chance to see new country."

"You're not forgetting about marrying Melody, are you?" Cal demanded.

Billy shook his head emphatically. "I'm dead set on getting hitched and settling down. So what we'll do, Cal, is meet at Melody's two-three weeks from now."

"Suppose I get there first?" Cal asked. "Those folks won't know me from Adam."

"I'll probably be there by the time you show," Billy said. "But in case something goes wrong, I'll write and tell her to be expecting you."

Cal grunted. "For all you know, she's already hitched."

"Not Melody," Billy told him. "She promised to wait for me."

"She didn't say how long she'd wait," Cal said.

"I know," Billy said. "That's the main reason I'm in a hurry to see her. It might be that right now there's another feller sitting on her front porch, and I mean to send him packing the minute I get back. By the way, Cal—just in case you do get there ahead of me, kind of give her father a hand with the chores, will you? I'm thinking he's going to need your help."

Her father won't get much help from me, Cal thought now, and put his horse down the road. He liked the looks of this valley, though. It was small and cup-shaped, with mountains towering all around, and plenty of new grass and bubbling creeks. Here and there he spotted a cabin and newly-plowed fields. By the

time he turned on the wagon trail that Billy had told him about, it was growing dark.

The road—if you could call it a road—was pocked with chuck holes that a man with a team of mules and a scraper could fill in without half trying. The fence Cal rode past was in sad need of repair, and it was unlikely that those fine grassy slopes and rich bottoms had ever seen a plow. When he came in sight of the littered yard, he knew for sure that Billy had been right about Melody's father. Henry Jarman was a naturally lazy cuss at best.

BUT if the yard were littered with odds and ends of junk, and the pole corral and sheds a sorry sight, the small house was something to behold. It stood out like a fat and prime Shorthorn in a bunch of mangy cattle. The clapboard walls had been whitewashed, and there were frilly curtains at the windows. Between the house and a bubbling creek grew neat rows of corn and other garden greens, and lilacs blazed on either side of the small porch.

Cal sighed. If it hadn't been for this homey touch, he would have turned right around and headed back the way he had come. As it was, he swung down at the corral and looked at a pair of dozing mules. Just then a short, fat man came from the house and lazed across the yard as though he were saving energy, and Cal decided that this must be Henry Jarman.

The homesteader was a cheerful-looking man with pink skin and mild blue eyes. Cal introduced himself, and Henry Jarman allowed that he was pleased, and offered a pudgy hand to show he meant it. No, Billy hadn't arrived, but they'd received his letter saying he'd had to return to Laramie to see a man about some cattle.

Cal looked at the ground to hide his scowl when he heard this. Well, the only thing he could do was to back Billy's fib, he thought, and wondered if the girl looked anything like her father. If she did, then Billy was a plain fool to want to marry her.

But Cal was wrong. Melody didn't look at all like her father. She was beautiful. When they sat down to supper, Cal couldn't get enough of looking at her. He scarcely tasted the fine meal of stewed chicken and fresh garden greens and hot biscuits and apple pie, he was so taken by her beauty.

She was just right for height, with a firm roundness that put her between slender and plump. Her hair was as black as coal, and Cal had the feeling that he could lose himself in the slanty depths of her dark eyes. She had a pouty mouth, though, and studied him in a sort of speculative way, as though she didn't quite trust him. With an effort he put his mind back on the best meal he'd had in many a month. He had to hand it to Melody, she could certainly cook.

Henry Jarman helped himself to seconds and cleaned his plate with the air of a contented man. Finally he scraped his chair back, heaved a satisfied sigh, and took a jug from the cupboard. He poured Cal a drink, handed him a cigar, and leaned back in his chair.

"Billy wrote some mighty fine things about you, Cal," he said. "We're right proud to have you for company. Isn't that so, Melly?"

The girl's eyes flew to Cal and steadied. "I reckon," she said finally.

"When we got Billy's letter, I told Melly, I said, 'Well, now, I might as well put off plowing until the boys get here.' Yessir. I've been so busy that I've been wondering how I'd ever find time to put in crops this year."

"What Pa means," Melody said, "is that he hopes you boys will do his plowing for him."

"Now, Melly, you know I'm not as young as I used to be," Henry objected mildly, and turned to Cal. "There're some farm girls that'll help out with the heavy work, but not my Melly. Do you think that's right, Cal?"

"Well, now—" Cal began. He made a pretense of coughing so he wouldn't have to commit himself, but Melody was not fooled.

"So you're not saying," she said, and curled her lips at him. "Well, I'll tell you what I told Billy and every other man that's ever called on me. It's a woman's duty to take care of her house and her menfolk, but it's a man's place to provide. I'll not have it any other way. And there's one man that comes calling who feels as I do about it."

"She means Luke Martin," Henry said in a worried tone. "Luke has a dandy farm on the other side of town. He also has the idea that Melly's bespoken to him, and he's a rough man. I'm hoping Billy won't tangle with him when he gets back."

"Well, I'm not waiting much longer," Melody said, a flinty edge to her voice. "I'm not getting any younger, either. I just might up and marry Luke."

"Why, that'd break Billy's heart," Cal said indignantly.

"I'll just bet."

"Besides, he's liable to come riding in any minute."

"If he does," Melody said, "he's going to be in for a surprise, because Luke's taking me for a drive tonight."

She carried the dishes to the sink and washed and dried them quick as a wink. Cal watched her in a troubled way, feeling somehow obliged to stand up for Billy's rights. When Luke Martin entered a few minutes later, with an air of old familiarity, Cal scowled at him with instinctive dislike.

Farmer though he might be, Luke was dressed like a drummer in a tight-fitting checkered suit, yellow shoes, and a bowler hat. He was big and solid, with a thick black mustache and curly sideburns. He had driven up in a red buggy behind a glossy bay. He met Cal's scowl with a quick flare of suspicion and resentment.

Henry introduced them, and they shook hands to see who could break the most bones. It ended up a tie, and Cal was forced to admit that Luke was pretty well put together.

HENRY explained that Cal was Billy's friend, but evidently Luke considered him an interloper and treated him as such. He made a few barbed remarks concerning shiftless cowpunchers, and then turned his guns on Henry, bragging about his farm and how there wasn't another man in the valley who could match him when it came to raising crops.

By the time Melody came from her room, Cal had had a bellyful of Luke Martin. She and Luke went out and drove away, and Henry sighed and allowed that Luke was all right as long as a man didn't have to see too much of him.

"Thinks a heap of himself, he does. But still and all, he knows how to farm."

"I wouldn't make too much of it," Cal said. "If a man works at it hard enough, he's bound to end up showing a profit."

Henry leaned forward a little and said slyly, "You know much about farming, Cal?"

"I've plowed a field or two in my time," Cal admitted cautiously. "But you take Billy —why, he's a bear for work."

Henry grunted. "I sure hope he gets here before long. Because if he doesn't, Melly's bound to marry Luke." He sighed. "And I sure would miss her cooking."

Cal nodded in agreement, for he himself was already looking forward to another of Melody's fine meals. Then it struck him that this was the way a man weakened. Good food, a pretty face, and you were roped and tied before you knew it. Cal warned himself to be on his guard until Billy arrived.

Meanwhile, he'd make the best of things. He might even help Henry with the chores to pay for his meals. As for Luke Martin, Cal wasn't sure what he should do about the fellow. Knowing Billy was due any day, Luke would probably do his darnest to marry Melody while he had the chance. And from what he'd seen and heard, Cal decided sourly, Luke's chances looked pretty good.

Melody was humming to herself like a happy bride when Cal came from his bunk in the shed next morning. Henry entered the kitchen in time for breakfast, and complained of a kink in his back. "I don't know that I can do much today," he grumbled. "But that's the way it goes when a man gets to be my age."

"Hah!" Melody said.

"I don't mind doing the chores," Cal offered gallantly.

Henry rubbed his hands together. "It pleasures me to hear you say that, son," he said, and helped himself to four fried eggs and a stack of wheat cakes. "Dig in! If you're going to work, you have to eat."

After a hearty breakfast, Cal went out and tended to chores. This didn't take long, so he decided he might as well dig in and clean

out the barn. An hour later he was cussing himself for ever having started the job, for there was no end to the junk Henry had accumulated through the years.

There were two rusted plows, torn collars, odd lengths of harness and rope, a dozen singletrees, boxes containing assorted nails, spikes, screws and hinges, all in a state of rust; tarps, paint cans, their contents dried and hardened, broken chunks of glass, bench and farm tools, odds and ends of clothing, and an old Saratoga trunk with a cracked lid.

Just contemplating it was enough to make a man turn tail and run. But Cal had started, and now he couldn't very well quit. By the time Melody called him for dinner, he was covered with dust and sweat, and his ribs ached unmercifully.

Henry observed mildly that most of the junk could be thrown away. Melody was strangely silent, but toward the end of the meal she remarked that it was nice for a change to see a man busy around the place.

"I'm only doing it to help Billy out," Cal told her. "By the time you two get married, he'll have to start his plowing, and won't have much time for other chores."

"What," Melody demanded archly, "makes you so sure I'm going to marry Billy?"

"You're promised to him, aren't you?" Cal said. "And since he's my buddy, let me say right here and now that I think you have no call to go sparking with this fellow Luke Martin."

"That's none of your business," she said. "Mr. Martin is a fine farmer. A girl could do a lot worse than marry him."

"If you do, Billy's liable to make you a widow on short notice," Cal said grimly. "He won't stand having Luke make a fool of him."

"Well, Billy was always shiftless, and I won't marry a shiftless man," Melody said. "I want to be proud of my man, proud of the way he farms, and I want others to feel the same way. I want folks to be able to say that ours is the best farm in the valley."

"Give Billy his chance, and maybe they will," Cal said, and when he saw her eyes soften he told himself that Billy had better not disappoint her.

AFTER he finished cleaning the barn, he hitched the mules to the work wagon and spent the rest of the day hauling junk and trash to a deep gully back in the hills. He was so tired that he went to bed immediately after supper. Just as he started to fall asleep, Luke Martin drove up to the house in his buggy, and Cal decided grimly that he would have to do something about the man. He was sparking Melody behind Billy's back, and it wasn't fair. Not fair at all, Cal thought drowsily, and fell into a deep sleep.

Since a fine farm and a husband went hand in hand as far as Melody was concerned, Cal decided the next morning that the more he accomplished before Billy's return, the better his friend's chances would be to marry the girl.

So after breakfast he fixed up a scraper of sorts, hitched the mules to the contraption, and leveled the farm road. The ground was sandy loam and worked easily, but still it took him two days of steady labor before he was satisfied that he'd done a job of which he could be proud.

Henry shook his head admiringly when he inspected the road. "I've been meaning to fill those chuckholes right along, but I don't reckon I would've done it as well."

"It's one chore Billy won't have to worry about, anyhow," Cal said, and wondered how much longer it would be before his old trail partner showed up. Billy, he reflected sourly, was taking his own sweet time.

Billy was still absent the following Saturday. Late that afternoon, Cal happened to be fixing fence where his new road joined the valley road. He was about ready to call it a day, when Luke Martin came along in his buggy. Cal knew Luke was on his way to pick up Melody and take her to a dance in town, so he straightened and scowled at the big man, but kept his mouth shut.

Luke scowled back and stopped the buggy. "For a saddle tramp, you're doing all right for yourself," he said. "But the way I see it, you've just about worn out your welcome. Which means I want you to hit the trail pronto."

"If I hit anything at all, it'll be you," Cal

said. "And I'll be doing it for Billy, who's not here to fight for his girl."

"*My* girl," Luke growled, and looped reins around the whip post.

"His," Cal snapped, stepping toward the buggy.

"Mine!" Luke put his bowler on the seat, took his coat off, and climbed down.

"His!" Cal said.

They met with a flurry of blows. They were still at it when Melody came on the run, her face flushed with anger. She turned first on Luke, and spoke words that fairly dripped with venom. Luke, his battered face dark with rage and humiliation, climbed in the buggy and drove away after giving Cal an I'm-not-through-with-you look that hit Cal like a bullet.

Then Melody turned on him. "What was the idea of fighting over me?" she demanded. "Who gave you the right to?"

"I wasn't fighting over you," Cal growled. "I was doing it for Billy."

"Let Billy do his own fighting."

"He's not here!"

"Neither will you be here if you keep this up!"

Eyes sparkling, she sook with fury. She had already changed to a party gown the color of burgundy wine, and she was so beautiful that Cal put his arms around her and kissed her right on the mouth.

Melody stared at him wide-eyed and said, "Ohhhh!"

Cal found himself trying to explain what he didn't even understand himself.

"I didn't have the right, and I'm sure enough ashamed," he said miserably. "Since you're Billy's girl—"

"Since I'm *supposed* to be Billy's girl, you're taking a lot for granted. You're not only doing his work and fighting his fights, but you've also taken it upon yourself to kiss his girl."

She glared and walked by him toward the house, and Cal followed at a discreet distance, wondering what had possessed him. He'd not only worn out his welcome, he'd turned and stabbed Billy in the back. He guessed that the only thing left for him to do was pack up and leave.

But he perked up some during supper, for though Melody was cool and aloof, neither did she make an issue of what had happened. So by the time he went to his blankets, he'd decided to stay on until Billy arrived. After all, he couldn't just up and leave when there was still work that needed doing.

It took Cal another week to repair all the fence lines, and by the time the following Saturday rolled around, there was still no sign of Billy. There was no sign of Luke, either, and if Melody missed him she did not show it. That suited Cal just fine, even though he had the feeling that Luke was far from through with him. Henry said as much.

"You'd better learn to watch your back trail," he said, "because Luke isn't a forgiving man. He killed a feller one time in a gun fight, and he's as liable as not to go after you with a gun."

Since Henry still had trouble with his back, he spent most of his days rocking on the porch. Cal thought a lot of him, and the two men passed many happy hours swapping tall tales or playing checkers. At times like that Cal had a homey, contented feeling that was strangely comforting. And once or twice there, when he thought of drifting to new country after Billy's return, the prospect gave him no pleasure.

THIS worried him some, and he wondered if it might not be a good idea to do as Billy had suggested, find himself a girl and settle down. The section next to Henry's place was still open. A man could file and build and put in crops and amount to something instead of wasting the good years. I'd never have thought it of myself, Cal reflected. I must be getting old.

If a man wanted a girl, he had to scout around and find one. So Cal decided to attend the dance in Green River. He left early, and bought himself a shave and a haircut and some new duds. Then he had supper and went to the hall. The place was crowded, the music loud. Cal danced a few times with buxom farm girls, but for some reason or other his heart wasn't in it. He kept thinking of Melody, and wishing he'd asked her to come with him, when she entered, on Luke's arm.

Cal growled in his chest at the sight of them dancing. So she'd forgiven Luke; she'd probably been meeting him on the sly all week. Cal swallowed his hurt and claimed a dance. Luke happened to be talking to a couple of fellows and didn't notice, so Cal waltzed away with Melody. He had it in mind to tell her exactly what he thought of a girl who was bespoken to one man and went buggy riding and dancing with another, but he somehow never got around to speaking his thoughts.

"Careful, stranger. There's a man in this town with four daughters."

Maybe it was because Melody danced with a sweep and a sway that was light as a feather. Maybe it was the way she snugged up in Cal's arms, and the flowery scent of her, that made him forget all about what he meant to say. As it was, he did not speak one word. But when the music stopped Luke was suddenly at his elbow, and Luke had plenty to say.

He never did finish, though; something snapped in Cal, and his fist lashed out. Luke went down. Hands grabbed Cal, and three or four farmers escorted him to the door and pitched him roughly into the night. Cal had one last glimpse of Melody stroking Luke's cheek, before a boot caught him in the seat and helped him outside.

Melody wasn't at the house next morning, and Henry said she had spent the night in town with a girl friend. Cal sighed with relief. He'd figured to pack up and leave directly after breakfast, but now he decided to start right in with the plowing. Henry beamed when he heard this.

"You just sit there and relax while I fix us some breakfast," he said.

Henry, it turned out, was no hand with a skillet. His eggs were like boot leather, and his wheat cakes were soggy and lumpy. Cal ate what he could, then went to work. He was still at it near dusk, when Luke brought Melody home.

Not wanting any further trouble with Luke, Cal went on working until the man had gone. By this time it was nearly pitch dark. He unhitched the mule, fed the stock, and finally found the courage to enter the house. Melody was cooking supper and talking brightly to her father. Outside of giving Cal a sharp, unforgiving glance, she pointedly ignored his entrance. So, for the rest of the evening, he spoke around her to Henry, and tried to make the best of a bad situation.

Things didn't improve much during the next few days. Cal stuck to his plowing and Henry, marveling at the improved condition of his farm, found the energy to do a little planting. He planted a field of potatoes and one of corn, and he took pride in his work.

"I'll be danged if I'm not feeling better," he told Cal. "There's fight in the old dog yet, son."

But Melody's attitude remained cool and aloof, and to Cal she scarcely spoke at all. Cal found himself getting moody. Though he was still eating heartily, Melody's fine meals lay heavy in his stomach. And he was beginning to wonder if Billy would ever arrive.

Either something drastic had happened to Billy, or Cal's old partner hadn't been able to stop drifting. Cal suspected the latter, and it worried him to think that Billy might never return. Well, no matter what, the day the crops were planted Cal meant to leave.

He'd been loco to think of settling down. Never, during his years as a drifter, had he been so low in spirits, and all because of a girl who was promised to his friend. If it

were this bad now, how bad would it be if he met another girl and really fell in love with her?

He tried to lift his flagging spirits by thinking of the new country he would scout before long. He and Billy had often talked of drifting California way. But a man couldn't go alone; he needed a trail partner to share his spoken thoughts. But even more than that, he needed enthusiasm for the trail ahead, and Cal realized dully that he had lost his during the last few weeks.

He had lost his enthusiasm for work, too, but he kept at it just the same. Melody wanted a farm she could be proud of, and she was going to get one come hell or high water. So Cal kept at it, he and the mules—and Henry.

SPRING rains fell gently, and the corn sprouted, the fields turned green. Henry had planted wheat on the gentle slopes, and it seemed to grow inches overnight. One day, Cal knew he was at the end of his rope. He'd tried to make the work last as long as possible, but now about all there was left to do was paint the barn and the sheds. He told himself grimly that Billy had better appreciate what had been done for him.

He went to town and bought the paint, then stopped in the saloon for a drink. Luke came in as he was leaving. They took one look at each other and took over where they had left off. This time no one tried to stop them. They fought for an hour, and wrecked the saloon. It ended with Luke flat on his back, and Cal was so groggy that he could scarcely make it out to the wagon under his own power.

Cal guessed that wasn't the end of it, though. He stopped to wash up at a stream, and when he got back to the farm he checked his sixgun and pushed it inside his shirt. He meant to be prepared, in case Luke came looking for him with a gun.

Since his mind was on Luke, he didn't notice the two extra horses in the corral until he unhitched and led the mules through the gate. Then he heard a whoop and a holler from the house, and felt his bruised lips stretch in a grin. Billy was here

Now that was a pleasure, he told himself. But an hour later he wasn't so sure. Billy sat on the sofa, an arm around Melody, and behaved as though he'd never been away. He hardly mentioned all the work Cal had done. He told tall tales of the new country he'd scouted, and snuggled up to Melody too familiarly.

A little resentment stirred in Cal. Here he'd gone and worn himself out working for Billy's sake, and he hadn't received a word of praise. Well, no use saying anything. Tomorrow he'd hit the trail. He'd kept his promise to Billy, and now there was nothing else he could do

He said as much. "I reckon I'll be drifting in the morning. I've been thinking of heading for California, and it's time I got started."

Melody blinked her lashes, pushed Billy's arm from around her shoulders, and sat up straight. Billy didn't seem to notice. A faraway look had settled in his eyes.

"Met a feller on the way over that was talking about going to California," he said "He's been there before and says it's quite a place. I wouldn't mind going myself."

"You'll have your hands full before the crops ripen," Cal told him.

"Sure, sure," Billy agreed. "I was just talking, that's all. This feller I was telling you about is in town right now. Maybe you can team up with him, Cal."

Cal said nothing. He could feel Melody watching him.

"Billy bought a pack horse in Laramie," Henry said slyly. "Maybe he'll let you have it, Cal. A man needs a pack animal on a long trip."

"He's yours if you want him," Billy said, and Cal grunted thanks.

Then he rose. "Well, I might as well start packing," he said, and went out. He had never felt so hollow and sick in his life.

Billy reacted with little enthusiasm when Cal showed him around the farm next morning. "Man, you sure dug in and got the work done," he said grudgingly, and looked over to where Henry was hoeing weeds in the corn field. "You even got Henry working."

"All he needed was a little push to get started," Cal said.

"That's all right, but who's going to push me?" Billy asked mockingly, and Cal took offense.

Looking across the fields toward the farm buildings, he had the long-gone feeling of a man who hates to part with the only life he ever really cared about.

"You'd better settle down," he told Billy roughly. "Melly's been waiting a long time to marry you, so don't get any ideas about roaming. Because if you do she's bound to marry Luke Martin, and that's not something I'd like to see happen."

"Don't worry about me," Billy snapped back. "As for Luke, he hasn't a show where I'm concerned."

"Well, you don't seem too happy about settling down," Cal said.

"Takes time to get used to it, that's all." Billy looked at Cal. "Are you sure enough heading for California?"

"That makes no difference where you're concerned," Cal said, and neck-reined his horse. "Well, I'd better finish packing."

He went to the house to pick up some shirts that Melody had promised to iron. Cal scarcely looked at her, for fear his heart would break. He'd known last night that he loved her, but now it was too late to speak.

He took the shirts and said, "I sure do thank you, Melly. Now I'd better say so long and be on my way."

Melody, her cheeks flushed, said angrily, "Aren't you even going to stay for the wedding?"

"I reckon not," Cal said miserably, scarcely able to stand the thought of it. He grasped at a lie. "Fact is, I met a girl in Laramie last winter, and I've been thinking of getting hitched myself."

"What?" she breathed, her eyes wide with hurt. "Oh, you—" she flashed, and whisked out of the room.

CAL went out to where Billy was waiting by the corral. "I thought I'd help you load," Billy said gruffly.

He reached for the shirts, and as Cal started to hand them over, Billy yelled something and went for his gun. It happened so fast that Cal was certain his old trail partner had gone loco and meant to kill him. There were two shots, and Cal felt a bullet tug at his sleeve. At the same time he heard a yelp of pain behind him. He spun and saw Luke Martin holding a bleeding wrist. Luke's gun lay at his feet.

"The sidewinder tried to get you in the back," Billy said angrily.

"I reckon I went plumb out of my head," Luke said hastily. "I'll not come around here again."

"If you do, next time Billy'll shoot straighter," Cal said.

Luke got his horse from behind the barn and rode away. Then Melody came running outside and threw her arms around Cal.

"I thought he'd kill you!"

"He would have, if it hadn't been for Billy," Cal said miserably.

Billy said excitedly, "Man, I'd better make tracks before the sheriff gets here."

Cal stared. "What's that?"

"Sheriff Moody never did like me," Billy said. "Once he hears about this, he's bound to jug me. So I'd better clear out."

"But you didn't—" Cal protested weakly.

"Don't worry about Billy," Melody said. "Once he gets across the border he'll be all right."

"She's right, Cal," Billy said. "I'll just take what you have packed."

Cal groaned. "But how long will you be gone?"

"It's hard to tell," Billy said, and swung into the saddle, an enormous grin on his face. "It's a long haul to California, and a man can't tell what'll happen when he gets there." His grin widened. "But when I do get back, I hope to hear some little Melodies and Calvins around the place."

Cal kissed Melody resoundingly, and said, "I reckon he didn't want to stay after all."

"I reckon," Melody murmured, "that I knew something like this would happen all along. Do you suppose we can oblige him by having a few little Melodies and Calvins around when he gets back?"

"I reckon," Cal said, and kissed her again.

Silver Heels

a true story

by BURTON L. WOLLENZEIN

AMID a rugged wind and snowswept area of Colorado, amid towering mountains, there is one lovely snow-capped peak named Mount Silver Heels. It was more than ninety years ago that the people in the mining camp of Buckskin Joe gave the peak its name, as a token of gratitude to a dancehall girl.

In those days, dancehall girls were commonly referred to as "hurdy-gurdy girls." Adorned with several hundred dollars' worth of gay ribbons, silks, and laces, they sold five-minute dances to all comers, at prices ranging from fifty cents to one dollar. Half of the money was kept by the girl, while the other half went to the house. The primary aim in the life of these girls was that of mining gold —the easy way.

It was just such a girl who came to the fast-growing mining town of Buckskin Joe during the boom era. Attractive and graceful, she soon became the idol of the miners and the envy of the other camp women. Despite the importance of beauty to a girl in her profession, a certain amount of this particular young woman's charm was due to the air of mystery which surrounded her—a tantalizing and intriguing mystery which was further enhanced by the pink silk mask covering the upper portion of her face.

As far as can be ascertained, no one in the town ever saw her without the mask. Though almost any one of the miners would have given a large poke of gold dust to see her without the mask, they respected her desire to keep that portion of her features concealed.

Naturally, under such circumstances, rumors began to circulate as to her real identity. During the course of these rumors she became everything from a prospector's wife to the

daughter of a prominent Eastern family; but all the theories were pure supposition.

This mysterious dancehall girl became a favorite in Buckskin Joe, and stories of her beauty spread like wildfire to other mining camps. One of her many admirers fashioned a pair of silver heels for her dancing slippers, and the flash of these heels on her dancing feet soon earned her the name of "Silver Heels." In time, no one even remembered the name she had used when she first entered the town.

In October, 1861, two Mexicans drove a flock of sheep into the camp, and stayed until the animals had been sold. One of the men became violently ill, and soon died. His death had been caused by smallpox. Almost before the miners were aware ot it, an epidemic raged through the town.

Business was suspended and the dancehalls deserted, but the sound of hammers and saws continued to be heard. They were no longer being used to build homes, but had been turned to the more imperative task of fashioning wooden boxes to be used as coffins.

Each day the living carried the dead to the little cemetery, and buried them under the aspens. As they returned to town, the living pondered about how soon they might be going out to the cemetery again—in a box. The population of Buckskin Joe was being decimated, as more and more miners were being stricken with the plague.

As soon as the epidemic had struck the town, the women who were not yet ill had fled to the comparative safety of Fairplay, Colorado. Silver Heels alone had refused to leave and for some time was the camp's sole nurse.

She nursed the stricken and comforted the dying, until she too was stricken with the plague.

Retiring to her cabin, she began the battle for her own life. An old woman who Silver Heels had nursed through the sickness returned the favor by caring for the courageous dancehall girl.

THE people of Buckskin Joe never saw Silver Heels again, even thought she did recover, after a desperate siege of illness. Gradually her strength returned, and very early one morning she dressed herself in all her finery and packed all of her belongings.

After telling the old woman that she would not return, Silver Heels stole away from the camp and into oblivion, as far as any authentic records are concerned. In all probability, no mask could have concealed the hideous scars which had surely marred her former beauty.

The epidemic had now run its course and, as no new cases were being reported, the survivors went back to their mining. In gratitude to the mysterious woman who had risked her life and her looks to nurse the sick, the citizens of the town of Buckskin Joe made up a purse of $5,000.

The presentation committee who took the money to her cabin was told by the old woman that Silver Heels had gone, she knew not where.

A search for her proved fruitless, so the bewildered committee returned the money to the donors. But the determined citizens of Buckskin Joe, refusing to be thwarted in their gesture of gratitude, named the mountain in her honor.

Some years later a richly gowned woman, her face hidden by a heavy veil, visited the little cemetery and wept over the graves of the plague victims. These visits, repeated annually for several years, aroused much comment and speculation.

Though the woman's identity was never disclosed, the miners were certain she was Silver Heels returning to mourn her friends; and the heavy veil was for the purpose of concealing the pock marks on her once-lovely face.

Regardless of who this veiled woman may have been, the mystery of Silver Heels's pink mask and her real identity are just another of the many mysteries which are a part of the wonderful and exciting history of the Old West.

Almost a century has passed since that time. Silver Heels and the town of Buckskin Joe are now but dim shadows of the past. But a certain snow-capped mountain peak northwest of Alma, Colorado still stands, a lasting tribute to the unselfishness of Silver Heels—a dancehall girl.

The Dilemma of

by LEOLA LEHMAN

Hannah backed away, but Charlie reached out and grabbed her

HANNAH WANTED to fight the world alone . . . till she learned

how comforting it is to have a man around in case of trouble

Hannah Adams

TENSELY, Hannah Adams, a slim, pretty girl of twenty-one, perched on the edge of the swaybacked cot in her airless little room and waited for darkness to fall. Her mother's funeral was over now, and the last tie that held her here was gone. She could leave.

Her stepfather, Lonzo Smith, fully expected to keep her on as drudge in place of her mother, she knew, but he was due for a surprise. Now that Mom was out of his reach, Hannah was free to leave, and leave she would as soon as darkness fell. The run into the Cherokee Strip in Oklahoma was to be made the following week, and she would be there. She'd file on a piece of land and have a home of her own, where no man would have any say over her.

For as long as she could remember, Hannah had watched Lonzo browbeat her mother. She had felt the heavy weight of his hand herself when she displeased him, and to her Lonzo was all men, and she hated and distrusted the lot of them. She hated all of them except Alec Storms, that is.

There was something about Alec that set her pulses pounding when he was near—Alec, whose open admiration both astonished and frightened her.

"I never intend to marry," she had told him, and meant it, even though it gave her a queer hurt to see the lively joy go out of his tanned face. And, as she sat there on her cot, she was convinced that she wanted to get far away from him.

Months ago, when she had first heard of the planned Oklahoma run, it had sounded like the sweet promise of freedom to her. She was twenty-one, and eligible to file on the land. But then she had looked at her frail, workworn mother and knew that she couldn't leave her alone with Lonzo, no matter what.

Then Mom fell ill and died. In her grieved heart Hannah knew that her mother now had the peace that she had never found in life. And now, Hannah thought, I am free to go if I can slip away without Lonzo's knowing. She shivered nervously, and thought of Alec, as she always did when troubled. Funny, the lost feeling she had every time she thought of him. He'd looked so serious when she told him of her plans. She sighed and bent down to feel under the cot.

Her fingers touched the small roll of food and clothes, wrapped in a blanket, that lay hidden there, and she relaxed a little. She watched with strained and hurting eyes as layer after layer of darkness spread out over the countryside. Lonzo came in and walked heavily into his own room. There was a creak of weak bedsprings and then, after a while, the rasp of heavy snoring. And darkness had come.

Carefully, Hannah got up from the cot. She pulled the blanket roll from under the cot and tiptoed to the closed door. The snoring in the next room rumbled on as she opened the door and hurried silently out into the night. Not one shred of homesickness touched her as she left the house where she had lived all her life.

Hannah's hands trembled as she hurriedly saddled Pal, her pony. She tied the blanket roll on behind the saddle and then swung up. For a moment she sat there and looked toward the dark shadow of the house, then she touched the horse's sides gently with her heels.

"Come on, boy. Let's go!" she whispered.

All that night and most of the next day Hannah rode. She stopped for a short rest once in a while beside a handy stream, and let Pal drink and graze. She was not afraid. No matter what the future in the new land held for her, it would be better than what she had left.

And so Hannah reached the border, where a monstrous crowd waited to make the run. Astonished at the size of the milling mob, she pulled up and stared in dismay. There were men alone, women alone, families. Dogs

barked, children raced about screaming and shouting, men's voices were raised in laughter and argument. And, laced through all the other sounds, were women's voices, high-pitched and anxious.

DUST fogged up from the bare strip in front of the campground, and Hannah saw mounted soldiers watching the ground. Timidly, she pulled Pal up beside a covered wagon where a slatternly woman bent over a skillet on a smoldering campfire.

"Hello," she said. "Could you tell me where I am supposed to register?"

The thin woman straightened up, pushing back a strand of graying hair with her smoke-grimed hand. "Over yonder." She motioned toward a small booth a hundred yards or so away. "Coming in alone?" interest flickered up for a moment in her faded eyes.

"Yes," Hannah told her. "I want to have a home of my own." She thanked the woman and rode over toward the booth.

A long line of men and women were strung out in front of the booth. Hannah unsaddled Pal, picketed him where he could graze, and took her place at the end of the line. She looked curiously at the others, and then her heart raced suddenly. There was something familiar about the way a man far up near the booth stood, the way he held his head so high and proud. He looked like Alec; but Alec was back on his father's farm. She must be mistaken.

But she wasn't. After a while the man turned and spoke to someone behind him, and Hannah saw Alec's sunbrowned face and the white flash of his teeth when he grinned at the other. Her heart thumped crazily, but she pushed the feeling away. This was probably the way Mom had felt about Lonzo once, and look what it had got her! Carefully, Hannah avoided looking toward Alec again, but the knowledge that he was up there kept nagging at her. So he had decided to make the run too. She couldn't push away the excitement that made her feel.

The sun blazed down. Choking dust eddied about in a hot wind, and soon Hannah's throat felt parched for want of a drink. A small boy walked along the line of uncomfortable, sweating people with a bucket of water and a cup.

"Water, ten cents a cup," he chanted.

Many gave their dimes and drank thirstily. Hannah tried to shut out the cool, wet sound of it when the man back of her dipped up a cupful. More than anything just then, she wanted a drink, but she fingered the thin coin purse in her pocket and knew she dared not use of the little money she had. A heavy hand on her shoulder brought her out of her thoughts.

"Hey, sis, let me buy you a drink," a coarse whisper urged.

Hannah jerked away and looked back. A heavy-set man stood there, leering at her out of red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. An ingratiating smile twisted his thick lips back from tobacco-stained teeth. She brushed her shoulder where his hand had rested.

"No, thanks," she said coldly, and turned away. But the stranger was no so easily discouraged.

"Charlie's my name," his whispery voice went on. "Whispering Charlie, folks call me."

He kept talking, but Hannah ignored him, and after a while he stopped. But she was acutely aware of him standing back there. It took some of the gladness out of her day.

Alec was in front of the booth now, and she wished that she were there also. She wondered how long a person could stand in that blazing heat and not get sunstroke. Then she saw Alec leave the booth and turn to search the line deliberately with his steady gray eyes. Hannah drew back, but he found her and came quickly to where she stood. He smiled down at her as though she had never told him good-by forever.

"Hoped I'd find you here, Hannah," he said.

His deep voice stirred her as always, but she stubbornly refused to smile back at him.

"Well, now you have," she said cooly, and looked straight ahead up the line. She felt a pulse pounding in her throat and hoped Alec wouldn't see.

If he saw, he pretended not to. He calmly unhooked the canteen at his belt and held it out to her.

"Don't be so bull-headed. Take a drink or you'll be falling over with sunstroke."

Hannah tossed her head angrily, but her eyes came back longingly to the canteen Alec

thrust at her. She shouldn't let him do any favors for her, but she was *so* hot and thirsty! Trying to hide her eagerness, she took the canteen and tipped it to her lips. The water was tepid, but nothing had ever tasted so good.

When she handed the canteen back to Alec and met his eyes, she felt dimly sorry that she had to keep hurting him. But her fear of trusting any man was too great to let her stop. She thanked him stiffly and turned away and a moment later he left. Whispering Charlie made a few coarse remarks that made her cringe, but she kept her face averted and after a while he turned his attention to someone else.

THE days that followed were a nightmare, but the morning of the run finally came. Everyone lined up hours ahead of time to await the signal. Hannah stood beside Pal, her throat was tight. Today would decide if she was ever to have a place of her own, and suddenly she could hardly wait. Her jaw set and she gripped Pal's reins tightly. She would stake the first free claim she found, good or poor, just so that it would be hers alone.

Far down the line she saw Alec on Ace, his big black gelding, and she tried to keep her eyes away from him, for she saw that he was watching her. In spite of herself, it hurt to know that after today she might never see him again.

Eleven o'clock came, and then half past. The signal was to be given at high noon, and an electric feeling tensed the waiting horde. Excitement leaped through Hannah. She swung up into the saddle and watched, with straining eyes, the man who stood, watch in hand, awaiting the exact moment to set them off. The minutes became hours.

Suddenly, one of the homesteaders dashed out into the open space. A soldier shouted to him to return to the lineup and, when he didn't, fired. The man slumped forward in his saddle and clung there swaying. The crowd went mad. Some shouted to kill him, others begged that he be cared for. Hannah felt sick with the raging excitement inside her. She prayed that the man would live, even as she hated him for trying to get a head start. The edgy crowd stirred restlessly, the heat was almost unendurable. The dust choked Hannah, and she wondered if the few minutes left would ever pass. Then a carbine cracked.

With a great roar of sounds the run was on. Hannah dug her heels into Pal's sides, and the good little pony leaped forward. Some fine-bred horses were in the race, and they surged ahead and were soon out of sight. Covered wagons careened crazily across the rough countryside. A wheel came off one that was directly in front of Hannah. The terrified horses ran away, splintering the wagon and scattering people and furniture across the prairie. Hannah pulled aside and raced on. Nobody stopped for anything that day.

Almost an hour later, Hannah saw what she was looking for, stone markers without a stake in the center. That meant an unclaimed tract. A creek ran through the middle and left some waste land, but she didn't care about that. She jerked Pal to a stop and, a moment later, hammered a stake with her name on it into the hard ground. Then she stood up and looked around, and her throat was so tight it hurt. This was hers, hers to make into a home. She knelt suddenly, and touched the rough ground gently with the palms of her hands.

To Hannah this wasn't drought-burned grass and rocks and stunted blackjack trees along a winding creek bed; it was a home, her home, free and clear. She knelt on the ground and knew there might never again be such a happy moment in her life. But deep inside her was a queer, lost feeling she refused to face. It was a long time before she rose stiffly to her feet.

Wagons, surreys, horses and mules surged past, urged on by frantic drivers. A weak-chinned man on a thin scrub of a horse stopped and told Hannah she was on his claim. He slid to the ground and walked toward her menacingly. Hannah stared at him, surprised into a wild fury at his attempt to intimidate her. She grabbed up a fist-sized stone and started toward him.

"Get out of here before I brain you," she said tightly.

The man's eyes darted about, and his weak mouth wobbled. Then, abruptly, he turned and climbed back onto his bony horse.

"Get along," he snarled, and kicked the horse viciously in the side.

Hannah stared after him contemptuously. She knew his kind and wasn't afraid. He was another Lonzo. Then she realized that he might not be the only one to try to jump her claim, and fear crept over her.

There would certainly be more people than tracts of land, and she was just lucky to have found an unclaimed one. She was thankful, too, to the greed that had kept many from taking a claim that didn't look too promising in the hope of finding a better one farther along.

It was near sunset, and Hannah picketed Pal close to the creek, where he could graze and reach the water. After a while she noticed smoke off to the southwest, and watched uneasily. It came rapidly closer, and horror stabbed through her when she saw leaping tongues of flame mixed with the rolling clouds of smoke. She got to her feet! A prairie fire! In minutes the fire came closer, and she could hear the roar as it tore through the dry grass. Smoke billowed to the sky.

Hannah ran toward Pal, but even as she ran she wondered if they could outrun the fire. In the back of her mind she knew that if she left her claim she would lose it. Uncertainly, she stood holding the restless pony's reins. She was afraid to go and afraid to stay.

Then there was a crashing up the creek bank, and a moment later a tall, broad-shouldered figure rushed toward her. Hannah's heart leaped. It was Alec.

"Come on. Bring Pal and get into the creek." He motioned to her.

BUT the horses felt the tension. Pal snorted and jerked on his reins, and it was all Hannah could do to drag him down the bank into the water. Ace reared and pawed the air, and his eyes rolled. When Alec got him down into the creek near Hannah, he handed her the reins.

"Here. Hold Ace while I build a backfire."

By then ashes and smoke filled the air, choking them, but Hannah gripped the reins of the two horses and watched, wordless, as Alec built half a dozen fires along the bank nearest them, and fanned them into a good blaze. The flames ate back toward the raging tornado of fire that raced toward them.

Alec's fires looked feeble against the flames that leaped at them in a rolling mountain of smoke, and Hannah prayed that the backfire would work, even as she gasped for breath in the heavy, airless heat. Alec came and stood beside her, and even in this great danger her traitor's heart told her that Alec was always there when she needed him most.

Alec grabbed Pal's reins. "Get under the water as much as you can," he shouted above the roar of the fire. "I'll hold the horses."

Just then a wall of searing heat struck them, and the next half hour was an endless time of blistering heat, smoke, and staying under water until her lungs weer bursting for air. She was dimly aware of the horses snorting and fighting against Alec. Once, in the wild light, she saw their eyes rolling crazily, and heard their human-like screams of terror.

Then the wall of heat was gone. Nothing was left except a smoldering waste of land too hot to step upon. Alec's backfire had saved their lives. Trembling, Hannah staggered through the water until she stood beside him.

"Alec," she quavered, "I though we would die. I thought we would burn to death."

Alec dropped the frayed reins and took her in his arms. "It's all right now, darling. It's all right." He held her tightly to him.

But after a time the numbness began to leave Hannah, and she realized where she was. Memory flooded back, and she pulled away from Alec.

"I'm all right now," she said, and was careful not to stand close to him again.

"Hannah—" Alec began. Then he seemed to think better of what he had started to say, and didn't finish it.

They stood and waited for the ground to cool enough for them to wade out. Hannah began to wonder how Alec had happened to get to her just when he did, and she asked him. She tried to see his face, but now that the fire was gone it was the blackest night she had ever known, and she couldn't see her hand before her face. The fire seemed to have burned out all the light in the world. She thought she heard Alec sigh, and then his voice reached her.

"You were never out of my sight, Hannah. When you stopped here I staked the claim to the west of you."

His voice sounded deep and sure and kind, and swift tears rushed to Hannah's eyes. She rubbed them away with grimy hands and told herself she was tired and upset. It didn't really matter where Alec lived. It didn't matter to her.

"You could have stayed out front, with a good horse like Ace. You'd have found a better claim," she said shakily.

In the darkness Alec's calloused hand found her arm, touched it, and left. "You matter more to me than the land," he said simply.

Hannah's breath shuddered through her, and she moved further away. Suddenly she was afraid of Alec, afraid of the way he made her want to forget all she had learned at Lonzo's hands.

Soon after, Alec went to see if the ground had cooled enough for them to walk on. It had. Hannah waded ashore and wondered drearily how they would spend the long night before them.

Alec managed that. He raked the still-warm ashes aside and spread their blankets on the cleared places. "Better get some sleep. We might be camping out for quite a while," he said.

Hannah was sure she couldn't sleep, but when she opened her eyes it was daylight, and Alec was gone.

She shuddered as she looked at the blackened prairie. This was a bad start in her new life, but still it was better than staying on the farm with Lonzo.

She rolled up her blanket and went over to talk to Pal, who stood near the creek where Alec had picketed him to a half-burned stake. She rubbed the horse's soft nose and spoke to it gently.

"Just wait, Pal. It'll be different later." Pal tossed his head and nickered. He was hungry.

There were little patches of grass left between the creek bank and where Alec had built the backfire, and Hannah pulled bunches of it and fed the pony, then ate some of her own small store of food. She hoped Alec had something to eat.

She looked to the west where his claim lay, and saw some moving specks which she took to be Alec and Ace. It was comforting to know they were there.

HANNAH sat down on her small pile of belongings and waited. She knew she could not leave her claim to go file on it until the disappointed homesteaders who had rushed past looking for better claims, and ended up with nothing, had returned. Claims would be jumped, and she was determined hers would not be one of them.

By the middle of the morning the homesteaders began to straggle by on their way out, and she was glad she had stayed. Some people took their disappointment well, but others glowered at her as though she had cheated them somehow. Sometimes one or another stopped to look her land over, and she grew more and more uneasy.

It was along toward noon when a black-bearded man drew his ugly, hammer-headed sorrel to a halt not over thirty feet from where she sat. Hannah's breath came short. It was Whispering Charlie! He sat side hipped, looking about, and then walked the horse toward her. Hannah got quickly to her feet.

"What do you want here?" She tried to sound sure of herself, but could hear the tremor in her voice.

There was a threatening glint in Whispering Charlie's beady eyes, but he smiled, and Hannah knew he realized how afraid she was. She wished Alec were with her. Charlie slid to the ground and walked toward her. She backed away from him, and he stopped and laughed hoarsely.

"This is my claim, lady," he whispered hoarsely. "You just didn't see my stake."

He jerked Hannah's marker out of the ground, where Alec had driven it deeper before leaving that morning, and drove one that he took from his pocket into the hard soil. Then he faced her, a sneer twisting his face.

At that Hannah lost her fear. She was losing her claim to this bully, and she wouldn't have it. She rushed forward, jerked his stake from the ground, and threw it as far as she could, before he realized what she was doing. Then she faced him.

"Get off my land," she said furiously.

A mirthless grin pulled his thick lips back from his teeth. "Well, you've got some spunk after all!" He moved slowly toward her.

Hannah backed up, but Charlie grabbed her suddenly by the wrist. He drew her toward him—and then, suddenly, she was freed. She fell to her knees at the unexpected release. Gasping, she stared upward. It was Alec, but his expression was one she had never seen before. Eyes narrowed to slits and lips pulled tight against his teeth, his big fists slammed into the surprised bully.

Whispering Charlie gave a good acount of himself; he fought with the silent ferocity of a cornered rat. But nothing could stand up against the fury of Alec's anger. At last Charlie fell heavily to the ground and didn't move any more.

Alec stood over him, panting. Roughly he prodded him with his boot. "Get up and get out."

Whispering Charlie climbed painfully to his feet and into the saddle, and rode away without a backward glance. Alec watched for a moment and then turned to Hannah. And she came toward him.

"You're hurt, Alec." Her fingers touched his bruised, burned face yearningly.

There were tears in her voice and in her heart, for all at once she knew how wrong she had been. She had judged all men by the yardstick of Lonzo, and that was a mistake, a terrible mistake. She didn't try to keep her eyes from showing the love that blazed up in her as she looked at Alec.

Alec's hands closed hard on her shoulders. "Hannah." His deep voice sent a shiver of delight all through her, and she leaned against his broad chest. Her arms crept about him.

As she lifted her lips to Alec's she realized something she should have known long ago. No place could possibly be home to her without Alec in it.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Name two or three items of a range country rattlesnake's regular diet.

2. Steer is to bull as wether is to what?

3. Sometimes called "cheap cowboy," what elongated metallic aid for control of cattle first showed up on Western ranges about 1875?

4. The entire Navajo tribe, rounded up by Kit Carson, was held captive at Ft. Sumner, being fed by thousands of longhorns trailed from Texas. Pat Garrett killed Billy the Kid at Ft. Sumner. So where is Ft. Sumner—on what river in what state?

5. Cowboys call the heavy canvas covering of a bedroll a "tarp," which is an abbreviation of what longer word?

6. A famous cattle trail crossing, a frontier store and a brand of pills popular in the old west all bore the same name: D--n's. Supply the two missing letters.

7. Until 1846 all freight wagons entering Santa Fe on the Santa Fe Trail were taxed—by what government?

8. To which does a cowboy usually refer when he says a horse is "tender:" a sore back, a sore mouth or sore feet?

9. What is one of the several names that old time cowhands gave to this simple brand = ?

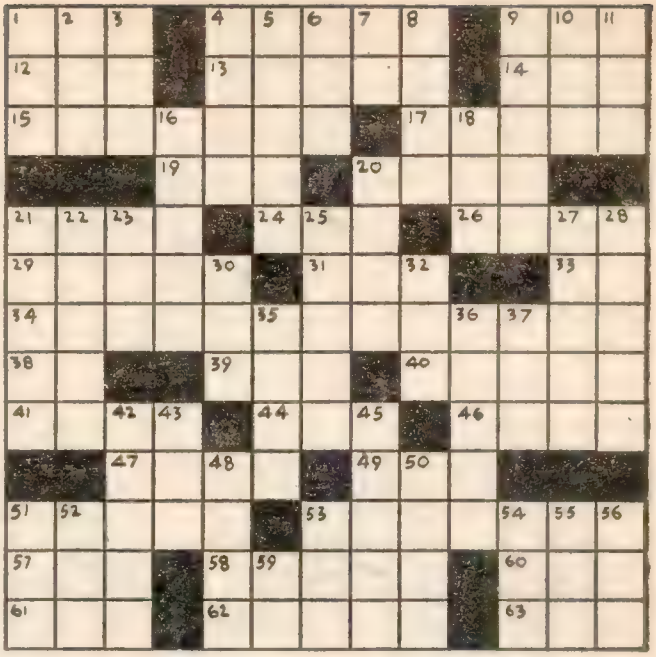
10. Roasted or barbecued *cabrito* (cah-BREE-to) is much relished in Mexico and along the Border. What is it?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 91. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

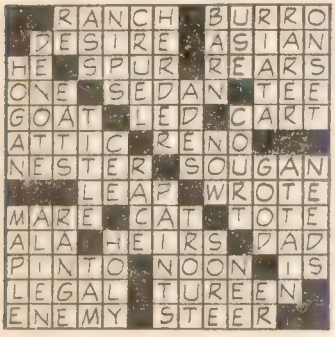
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue



ACROSS

1. Chart
4. Bed covering
9. Bashful
12. To grow old
13. Western arroyo
14. Tiny
15. Head cowboy
17. Bridle straps
19. Peculiar
20. Army automobile
21. Lone —— State
24. Strong beer
26. Not as much
29. To get up
31. Raw mineral
33. Toward
34. Rodeo performer (2 wds.)
38. Long Island (abbr.)
39. Woman's undergarment (colloq.)
40. To show contempt
41. Otherwise
44. Large deer
46. Twisted
47. Western plateau
49. Short sleep
51. Backbone
53. Town near ranches
57. Liquid fuel
58. Lariat
60. Enemy
61. Honey maker
62. —— Ross, flagmaker
63. Not many



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1. Small rug
2. Long, long ——
3. Liveliness (slang)
4. Food fish
5. Metal eye of a lariat
6. Finish
7. Edwin's nickname
8. Ripped
9. To steal (slang)
10. Egg producer
11. Opposite of "no"
16. Palomino
18. Snakelike fish
20. Sudden pull
21. Expensive fur
22. Forest path
23. What we breathe
25. Slow train
27. Beef animal
28. Regretful
30. To recede, as tides
32. Stammering sounds
35. Open surface
36. Not apt
37. Moisture on grass
42. Grin
43. Even (contr.)
45. Joins, as strings
48. Native of Serbia
50. Absent
51. To weep
52. Baked dessert
53. Mouser
54. Not on
55. Sorrow
56. Modern
59. Indian Empire (abbr.)

Stringer splintered a table and knocked over a chair as he fell

SUNDOWN CAFE

by ***ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS***

THE girl behind the counter said, sharply, "Sam, put on your boots!"

Sam Griswold lifted one tired eye from the cup of coffee he was drinking at the counter. Usually when he was around Miss Lucy he had both eyes wide open, looking to see what there was to see, which was plenty for any normal man. Also he liked to be around her because she kept him cheered up about his job as a deputy sheriff.

When she looked at him, the expression in her eyes always seemed to say she believed he could do anything. At this moment, however, he was not only in doubt about his ability as a deputy, but also about her idea that he could do anything. In addition, he was tired.

"I'm all worn to a frazzle, Miss Lucy. After my horse went lame on me and I sent the posse on, I walked close to twelve miles out

MISS LUCY BELIEVED Sam could work miracles . . . but it would take a king-sized one to get him out of this spot alive

there on the Owens range, crosscountry, trying to cut Ed Stringer's trail. I have blisters as big as silver dollars on both feet."

Ed Stringer was a young wildcat who had wandered into this tiny cowtown some weeks previously. When he wasn't playing cards in the Three Star Saloon, he had been hanging around this restaurant, making eyes at Miss Lucy, the girl who owned and ran it. Since Stringer was almost his own age, and had finer boots and fancier clothes, Sam hadn't liked this.

However, so far as the deputy knew, the law wasn't after Stringer; and, while Griswold suspected that the kid was riding the outlaw trail, he had had no proof of this until Stringer had held up the stage and had been positively identified by two passengers who were robbed. Stringer had fled north into the rough Owens range country and the posse, consisting of every able-bodied man who could be rounded up, was still out there looking for him.

The deputy who had organized the posse, and who was supposed to represent the law in this two hundred square miles of mountain and desert, was back in town. All he had to show for his efforts was sore feet.

"What are you looking at, Miss Lucy?" Griswold asked, when she continued to stare out the window.

"Ed Stringer is coming down the street right now," Lucy answered breathlessly.

Sam Griswold didn't attempt to put on his boots. He knew he had no time for that. Instead he slid the gun out of its holster at his hip, and moved toward the front door of the little restaurant. Looking out, all he saw was the main street, deserted under the slanting sun of late afternoon.

"Where is he?"

"He was coming down the street right there at the corner," the girl answered. "I saw him coming. He was riding a black horse and he was all sagged down in the saddle. A led horse was following behind."

"There's nothing in sight now," Griswold said. "Are you sure you saw anything?"

"Sam, don't you think I'd know Ed Stringer no matter where I saw him? He was in here often enough for me to know him."

"Well—" Griswold hesitated, uncertain.

"Just lay the gun on a table, Sam." Stringer's voice came from the rear of the restaurant. "When I noticed that Miss Lucy had seen me through the window, I thought I'd cut down the alley and come in the back door."

The deputy's hand froze on his weapon.

"Lay it on a table before you turn around," Stringer continued. "Otherwise, you won't be able to see me when you do turn."

"Why won't I?" Griswold asked.

"Because you'll be dead," Stringer said. "Lay the gun on a table, Sam. Then come back here and sit down at the counter. Miss Lucy, you put your 'Closed' sign on the front door and pull down the window blinds. I reckon most of the young bucks around this town are still up in the Owens range looking for me, which is why I cut back here. But some of 'em might come drifting down to town again. How does it happen that you're back, Sam?"

"My horse threw a shoe and went lame," Griswold answered.

Very carefully, he laid his gun on a table, then turned, walked back, and sat down where Stringer indicated. While the bandit lounged in the doorway that led to the kitchen, Lucy hurried around the counter and closed the front door, putting out the "closed" sign and pulling the blinds.

"Now what can I do for you?" she asked. She was still breathless, her face pale.

"One thing you needn't do for me is faint," Stringer said.

"I have no intention of fainting."

"All right, I'm not going to argue with you about it. Just fix me something to eat—some steak and some fried potatoes—fast. Also fill a sack with canned goods and stuff. And don't decide you can sneak out the back door when I'm not looking."

"What would you do in case I just walked out?" the girl asked.

"Well, since I couldn't stop two people at once, I guess I'd just shoot Sam first, to make certain he would stay until I caught you. Pour me some coffee before you start with the other things. Put in plenty of sugar." The bandit spoke lightly and easily, but under his soft voice lurked a temper that flickered like heat lightning.

LOUNGING in the doorway leading to the kitchen, the gun held easily in his hand, Stringer was all ease and unconcern on the surface. Only his restless eyes, constantly in motion from Griswold to Lucy and from the front door to the back, and the way he held his head, as if he were listening to sounds inaudible to the others, revealed the tension inside him. Death rode behind this man, and he knew it and was trying to hear it coming before it reached him. One of the passengers in the stage holdup had been shot, and had died.

Moving to the front, he picked up Griswold's gun from the counter and examined it. "Well balanced," he commented, slipping it into his belt.

"It's a good gun," Griswold said.

Sitting at the counter, he played with the salt and pepper shakers and tried not to look at Lucy. Her eyes were saying that here was his big opportunity. He could capture a killer and make himself a famous law officer; she knew he could do it.

"Probably you thought it had a bullet inside with my name on it," Stringer said.

"If I had caught you and you had tried to resist, I would have found out about that," the deputy answered.

"But you didn't catch me. And now maybe I'm the one who has a bullet in his gun with your name on it."

"It might be," Griswold said. "Right now I wouldn't give two whoops for my chances of being alive this time tomorrow."

"Scared?"

"I'd be a liar if I said I weren't."

"Scared enough to lie down and die?"

"Here's your coffee," Lucy said hastily, from behind the counter. "I put three spoonsful of sugar in it."

"Good." Stringer said. He sat down at the counter three stools away from the deputy, and lifted the coffee mug with his left hand. His right hand, cradled in his lap, held the gun. "You can get busy on the eats," he said to the girl. "And remember what I said about the back door."

"I won't forget," she promised.

"She's sure scared," Stringer commented. "Either she likes you a lot and is afraid I'll shoot you, or she's just scared of me."

Griswold remained silent. If anybody had asked him, he would have said that he felt as if he had already talked enough to last a month. Maybe enough to last a lifetime!

"I reckon she'll get over it, though," Stringer observed, sipping coffee. "Give her a little time and she'll learn she can like me too. Don't you think so, Sam?"

"It's kind of hard to figure a woman," Griswold observed, trying hard to say nothing.

What was in the back of Stringer's mind? The man knew he was on the jump and that a posse was scouring the Owens range for him. How could he think that he could spend any time with Lucy—or any time anywhere in New Mexico, for that matter?

"I guess you're right, at that," Stringer said. "However, I'll have a little time to learn how to figure a woman."

"How?" Griswold said, in spite of his intention to keep silent.

"I'm taking her with me."

"What?" Griswold's voice was suddenly gravel harsh. Involuntarily, his fingers curled around the heavy salt shaker as if they wished it were the butt of a gun.

"A bunch of trigger-happy deputies won't be nearly so eager to shoot if a woman as pretty as Miss Lucy is riding behind a man on the led horse. Or maybe right behind his saddle," Stringer said. He showed surprise. "Sam, I thought you would have guessed this already. Your boys have the passes blocked in the Owens range. The only way I can get through is by taking her as a hostage. That's the reason I cut back here—to get her."

The bandit seemed very pleased with himself. "The posse you left staked out up there in the passes are sure going to look twice when they see who I have with me!" Stringer's laugh echoed through the room.

"They'll follow you to hell if you take her," Griswold said.

"I reckon they'll try, all right," Stringer admitted. "But the point is, they won't be shooting. Once I get through the range and into the broken country to the north, no posse that ever existed will be able to catch me."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Griswold saw that the gun in the man's lap was pointing directly at him. Letting his weight sink back on

the stool, he took his fingers off the salt shaker.

"How do you like your potatoes?" Lucy called from the kitchen.

"Soon," Stringer said.

"They're coming real fast," the girl answered. "And the steak is almost ready, too."

"Pour me a cup of coffee too, will you, Lucy?" Griswold asked.

"No," Stringer said.

"Why not?"

"He might have some fancy idea in the back of his head about flinging it in my face,"

"Mighty clever, this geiger counter."

Stringer explained. "In which case I would have to shoot him."

"Oh, Sam wouldn't do anything like that," the girl said.

"Wouldn't he? He's so mad right now he's about ready to fly off that stool."

THE girl put the coffee mug back into the rack. She glanced at Sam, and again her eyes said she knew he would be able to take Stringer. Griswold let himself sink down on the stool again. Was the bandit reading his mind? That was exactly what he had planned to do with the coffee, if he got the chance. He began to play with the pepper shaker.

"Also, he's probably hoping that when you bring my food, you'll throw it in my face," Stringer continued. "Is that right, Sam?"

"No such thought ever crossed my mind," Griswold said bleakly.

"I'll bet it hasn't!" Stringer answered. "You're just sitting there waiting for the chance to jump me. And Miss Lucy is egging you on by making those goo-goo eyes at you."

"I have better sense than that, Ed," Griswold said. "I know when a man has the drop on me."

"See that you keep on knowing it," Stringer said.

Griswold did not answer. So far as he was concerned, he had no intention of forgetting it, except that Miss Lucy's eyes kept telling him that he could do anything. Very carefully, the girl set the plate of hot food before the hold-up man. The steak was a big one, medium well done.

"That looks good enough to eat," Stringer said. "Cut it up for me."

"There's nothing wrong with your hands. Cut it up yourself."

"I'm busy holding a gun with one of my hands," Stringer answered. "Cut it up and then get your riding pants on."

"Why should I put on my levis?" the girl asked, as she cut the meat.

"Because you and I are going to take a little ride as soon as I finish eating."

There was an awful instant during which Sam thought she was going to pick up the plate and slam it down on Stringer's head. Holding his breath, the deputy tried to decide which way he ought to jump to try to dodge a bullet. However, the girl bit her lips and finished cutting the meat. She then went directly to the kitchen, where a rustle of petticoats indicated she was obeying orders. Stringer ate like a famished wolf, gulping the food in chunks without seeming to chew it. By the time he had finished, the girl had changed clothes.

Under other circumstances, Sam had always thought that Miss Lucy looked real cute in riding pants. He didn't think so now. However, Stringer was of a different mind.

He whistled softly and appreciatively at the sight of her, then said, "Get me that coil of rope off the peg across the room."

"What for?"

"So we can tie up old Sam before we leave. If we went out of here and left him loose, he'd

be after us as soon as he could get himself another gun."

The girl moved to the other side of the restaurant and lifted the coil of rope from the peg on the hat rack.

"Okay, Sam, stand up so I can tie you," Stringer said.

As Griswold came to his feet, he twisted the top off the pepper shaker. Rising, he flung its contents into the bandit's face. Taken entirely by surprise, Stringer got the pepper in both eyes.

"Damn you!"

Hot lead blasted through the spot where Sam Griswold had stood an instant before. Then, catching the hot gun barrel in one hand, the deputy shoved it to one side. His fist traveled a foot upward, to where it connected with Stringer's jaw, with a sound like that of a sledge hammer meeting the skull of a calf in the slaughterhouse.

The bandit went over backward. His gun clattered across the counter and fell on the other side. He knocked down two chairs and splintered a table as he went to the floor.

"Your gun is over behind the counter, Ed," Griswold said. "Now get up so I can knock you down again."

Stringer twisted on the floor. He was stunned, but he was not out. The girl stood with the coil of rope in her hands. Her riding boots seemed to have become glued to the floor. Opening her mouth, she tried to speak, but no words came out. She had lost the expression in her eyes which said that Sam was simply wonderful and could do anything.

"Come on, get up," Griswold repeated. "I never jump a man when he's down."

Stringer, squirming on the floor, did not answer.

"You were letting everybody around town know what a big bad man you were," Griswold continued. "Now get up and prove how tough you are without a gun in your hands."

"Sam—" Lucy whispered.

Griswold paid no attention her. "I didn't kill you with one lick on the jaw. You're playing dead Injun. It won't get you anywhere."

"Sam, he's got your gun!" Lucy screamed.

Powder smoke and hot lead blasted past Griswold's head. The lead ripped a hole in the ceiling. Too late, Sam remembered that Stringer had taken his gun from him and had thrust it into his belt. Until now he had forgoten all about his own .38. He wondered why Stringer hadn't killed him with that first shot, and decided that the bandit had been too blinded by the pepper to see, and too dazed by the sock in the jaw to shoot straight.

However, Stringer wasn't too blind to miss on the next shot, if the deputy were stupid enough to try to jump him again. At such close range the bandit couldn't miss twice. With lead again ripping the air around him, Sam jumped the counter.

STRINGER'S gun was on the floor. Sam grabbed it. He decided he was safe here, that the counter would protect him. This thought lasted only a second; then it was knocked out of his head by a bullet smashing its way through the pine boards in front of the counter.

The thunder of gunshots and the sound of splintering boards filled the restaurant. Both men were shooting through a wooden partition, through which neither could see the other. Sam could not see Lucy either, but he hoped she had the good sense to stay glued to the same spot where he had last seen her. He didn't dare call out to her to run.

Right now Stringer's whole attention was concentrated on him, but if the bandit were reminded of the girl's presence, he might get behind her and, using her as a shield, walk out the back door to his waiting horse. Then the whole desperate business of taking him would have to be gone through again, under even more difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Lucy had been in the middle of the restaurant the last time Sam had seen her. Stringer was at the back, and Sam was shooting in that direction, so there was no danger of hitting her. She wasn't attracting any attention to herself by screaming or yelling, for which Sam was grateful.

The shots ceased. The restaurant was then so quiet that Sam could hear his own sweat dripping off his face and landing on the floor. He could not hear a sound from Stringer. Sam was lying flat behind the counter, as close to the floor as he could get. He guessed

that Stringer was lying as flat as he could get to the floor on the other side.

Crack!

The silence ended in the thunder of another gunshot. The bullet passed directly over Griswold's shoulder blades, coming so close to him that the hot lead ripped a jagged silt in his fannel shirt. Aiming at the hole in the counter through which the shot had come, he fired back. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

Stealthily, Sam pulled cartridges out of his shell belt. Taking great care not to make a sound, he broke the gun and pulled the empties free, then slid fresh shells into place. He stared in horror at what his eyes told him. The shells went into the cylinder and kept right on going.

The cartridges were from his belt, but this was Stringer's gun. The bandit's weapon was a .44, Sam used a .38. The cartridges from his belt would not fit the killer's gun.

Hardly daring to breathe, Griswold flattened himself to the floor again. Again silence came over the restaurant. The deputy knew this silence could not last very long. The gunshots would attract attention, and Stringer knew it. The bandit could not afford to wait, but would have to take some kind of action.

Did Stringer have another gun, or a knife? The deputy did not know. All he could do was wait and sweat and see. The sound of stealthy footsteps came to Griswold's ears. By golly, he thought, he was using my gun and he's emptied it. The shells in his belt won't fit my gun either. He's trying to run out.

The deputy got to his feet in time to catch a glimpse of Stringer tip-toeing out the back door, heading for the horses he had tied in the alley behind the restaurant. Night was close at hand. Stringer could shake off pursuit in the darkness, and days might pass before he was found again.

The coil of rope in her hands, Lucy was still standing in the middle of the room. She hadn't moved a muscle, but she looked as if she were going to start screaming any minute. She made mute signs with her hands as if she were trying to tell Sam what he already knew, that Stringer was escaping out the back door.

Snatching the coil of rope from her, Griswold dashed out the rear door of the restaurant. Two horses were tied there. Stringer was just mounting the nearest one.

The rope whistled in the air as Griswold spun it around his head. As Stringer set spurs to his mount, the flung noose settled over his shoulders, pulling him backward and out of the saddle. As he prodded the roped bandit ahead of him into the restaurant, Lucy came to life.

"I knew you could do it, Sam. I knew you could take him!"

The look in her eyes said that she wasn't in the least surprised, that she had known all along this would happen.

Sam Griswold wiped sweat from his face. He glanced over his shoulder at the long gash one of Stringer's bullets had torn in his shirt.

Looking down at the holes in the counter, he remembered how close those bullets had come to him.

"Sometimes, Miss Lucy," he said, "I wish you didn't have quite so much faith in me."

But her eyes were still shining up at him, and he couldn't resist putting his arms around her. If she wanted to go on telling him how wonderful he was, Sam knew he wouldn't get tired of hearing it—for the next hundred years or so.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 84)

1. Mice, lizards, rats, rabbits, birds, eggs of quail or other birds, etc.
2. Ram (male sheep).
3. Barbed wire.
4. On the Pecos River in New Mexico.
5. Tarpaulin.
6. Doan's.
7. The Republic of Mexico.
8. Sore feet.
9. Lazy Eleven, Double Bar, Equal Sign, Panther Scratch, Two Short Rails.
10. Milk fed kid. (Very young goat.)

a true story

by

Bill Severn

She rode the Chisholm Trail

SHE had been at the corral the whole day in the hot Texas sun while the cowhands sweated their cutting horses to separate the cattle for the beef herd that would go up the long Chisholm Trail. A tall, stately girl with her hair pulled into a severe top knot, Lizzie Johnson Williams was tired now from the heat and the dust and the labor of getting her outfit set for the month-long drive to Kansas.

But her eyes were still sharp as she chose a steer she wanted or rejected one that wasn't fit. Her voice, despite its womanly-soft drawl, commanded respect from the ranch hands.

She knew the cattle trade better than most men. Lizzie had begun her reign as a Texas cattle queen when she registered her brand in the Travis County record book ten years before, on June 1, 1871.

She had bought and sold and "brush-popped" steers, and had speculated in the financing of other drives, but on this sweltering spring day in 1881 she was about to begin the adventure that had long been her ambition. Lizzie was determined to become the first woman to drive her own herd with her own brand up the Chisholm Trail.

Her top-knot bobbled to sudden attention and her eyes narrowed as she stood in the buggy and spoke sharply to the men. "You head those two fat ones over with my herd," she called. "Don't you be giving them to him."

By "him" she meant her husband, preacher and cattleman Hezekiah G. Williams, who sat beside her in the buggy, grinning at her with the amused tolerance of a man who both loved and admired his wife. The cattle on the Williams ranch were divided into two separate herds.

The agreement she made her husband sign when she married him, at the age of thirty-six, was that her cattle and all her future gains from ranching were to remain hers. They would keep their own herds, their own brands, and conduct their business individually.

She consented to have the same foreman ride up the trail with both herds, and she agreed to travel in the same buggy with her husband, but she was to manage her own cattle, boss her own section of the drive, and make her own sales deal when they reached the railroad, nearly five hundred miles away in Kansas.

Lizzie and Hezekiah kept the separate business agreement all their lives. The friendly rivalry between them sometimes became a prankishly good-natured joke, as when she and her husband, each unsuspecting the other of the same trick, tried to rustle from one another some unbranded new-born calves. But on several more serious occasions, it was Lizzie's money and knowledge of cattle that saved Hezekiah from financial disaster.

She once paid $50,000 out of her own savings to set him up in business again after he went broke. At a later time it was her purse that produced the ransom to free Hezekiah from bandits who had kidnapped him. Lizzie had more experience than her husband, both in bossing cattle and in dealing successfully with bankers.

She was shrewd in her dealings and usually satisfied with a quick profit, while Hezekiah was more a gambler, who wanted to hold on for long-term speculation. He is said to have been a man who drank his liquor straight and often. Lizzie was a strict teetotaler.

Her father, Thomas Jefferson Johnson, established the first school of higher learning west of the Colorado River—in Texas. It was through her own pioneer schoolteaching that Lizzie became interested in the cattle trade.

She taught such varied subjects as music and French at several schools, but her best instruction was in bookkeeping. Lizzie was such a proficient bookkeeper herself that cattle speculators soon hired her at high wages to keep their accounts. She saw the fortunes that were being made with cattle, and decided to make her own.

It was a bold decision in an age when few women took even the slightest interest in any business matters, let alone an active part in the rough-and-tumble life of the cattle trade. The Civil War and the years immediately afterward had brought a glut of cattle to Texas because of manpower shortages, the loss of slaves, and the closing of normal markets. Unclaimed herds ran wild from unfenced ranches and roamed the plains, while calves were born faster than they could be counted.

BUT, in the North, there was a cattle shortage and a high demand. A good steer was worth ten times as much in Kansas as it was in Texas. Lizzie Johnson was among the hundreds who built up herds to be driven North by combing the brushlands for unclaimed cattle that could be had for the taking.

She invested her profits in the trail drives of other speculators, making as much as $20,000 on a single deal she financed for $2,500. Lizzie once showed up at a bank with thousands of dollars bunched, like wilted lettuce leaves, in an old red bandanna handkerchief. Another time, she re-sold cattle at a tidy

profit within twenty minutes after she had bought them.

Lizzie was shrewd and clever in cattle dealings, because she knew good steers as well as she understood the conditions of the trail-driving market. But for a woman cattle queen who was as physically bold as she was ambitious, rocking chair finance was no real satisfaction. She wanted to be out there with the men, sharing the adventure and the dangers of the trail.

And it *was* dangerous. Men had been killed, crippled, or ruined for life by the hazards of the long push North. The Chisholm Trail, even in its later days when it became a broad cattle highway rather than a path through the wilderness, was never any place for a lady. A lesser woman would have been unable to convince her husband to let her make the trip, at a time when most of the fair sex fainted at the drop of a handkerchief.

Hezekiah knew the troubles that lay ahead of them, that day his or her herds were gathered. He was no soft man himself; he had learned to ride a hell-bucking bronc as well as to castigate the devil from his pulpit. But he knew Lizzie, her courage and her determination, and he had given in as any man would who has the sense not to stand against a tornado.

Yet he loved her, and he was worried. But Lizzie's mind was on more immediate problems as they finally turned away from the corral. She had undertaken a man-sized job that would start with the morning, but there were still a woman's chores to be done in the kitchen.

The appetite-hearty trail hands had to eat for a month from the food Lizzie had prepared for the chuck wagon. It was all they would have, except for occasional kills of game or lucky catches of fish from the streams along the wild miles to come. And there was still pone bread to be baked in the wood-fired oven, and other food to be packed against spoilage.

Lizzie was up at dawn with the men, but she couldn't be blamed if she drifted into frequent drowsy cat-naps most of that first day on the trail. She was lulled by the rocking jog of the buggy over tracks still smooth and near to home, but her slumber wasn't so deep she didn't rouse herself to take Hezekiah to task for letting the herds be pushed too fast.

"What you do with yours is your own affair," she told him. "But mine I want to get there with enough beef on them to sell."

"Don't fret, Lizzie," he said. "They're just naturally wild and a bit jumpy. They know they're leaving home and have plenty of walking ahead. But they'll settle down when we get a few days' travel behind us."

"They'll stay jumpy if we keep pushing them. Ten miles is enough the first day. We've gone that and more. Do you want them so skittery they'll stampede?"

"Now, Lizzie, don't be telling me what to do."

"Do as you please." She waved down the foreman, and he came riding over. Lizzie told him, "My herd's bedding for the night, right here."

Hezekiah's herd bedded there, too. Lizzie helped with the hobbling of the horses so they wouldn't stray, and made sure the men knew the watches they were to ride through the night. Each cowhand would ride watch on the herd for about two hours, circling the cattle while he hummed or sang. Having taught music in school, Lizzie must have wanted to put her hands to her ears against some of the off-key vocal efforts that echoed out of the darkness that night.

But she well knew, from the experience of other trail herders, that even poor singing had a practical value. The balky longhorns seemed to like being sung to; the music soothed and gentled them. It let them place the direction of the sound, so a man riding night watch wouldn't come upon any of them too suddenly and spook them into running wild.

There was succulent fresh spring grass for the cattle to graze. Lizzie had discussed the date of beginning the drive with Hezekiah, insisting that they wait until there was a good show of green so there would be ample foraging as the herds moved northward.

She placed her bedroll near Hezekiah's, sleeping in the open as the men did, close to the warming campfire. The nights were cold, and would be colder. There were no tents; she asked for no sheltering luxury.

EVERYTHING that walked or rode or rolled was for the essential purpose of taking the herds to Kansas. On nights when it rained, Lizzie had a poncho, but it was scant protection; she was soon as soaked as the men, and she dried out in the next day's sun as they did, with little time to stop for creature comforts on the constant push north.

They were about two weeks on the way when the first real storm struck them. It had been a hot day, with full sun and a gathering of dark clouds toward evening, but no warning of what was to come. Jagged lightning pitchforked the sky, and with it a crackling clap of thunder.

The cattle moved uneasily. Lizzie thought of her warnings to Hezekiah that they had been driving the herds too fast, but she said nothing. Her lips were pressed tight as she studied the bunching, skittering steers. Lizzie hoped she would be wrong, but the herds were getting real goosey.

Some of the cattle crouched, and others stood quiveringly as they sniffed, restless and tense; the air seemed charged, and there was an eerie stillness. The men needed no orders from Lizzie to saddle up their horses. Hezekiah was with them, ready for trouble if it came. Lizzie knew that the cattle, still mostly wild, might scare at anything—the shrill cry of a bird or even the brief flare of alighted match.

Even she jumped at the next blinding flash of lightning. It struck the ground close, knifing a shaft of blue-white into the darkness, while the earth shook with thunder. The rain came in a stinging torrent that hissed like hellfire. A few young brush steers and a couple of old mossy-backs started the run. The others were in it then, a mad mass of cattle stampeding crazily into the night.

There was nothing that could stop them, nothing that could head them off, until the scare was out of them. They might run miles before then. All the men could do was try to keep abreast of the leaders, racing with them, and avoid the trampling that would cripple or kill any cowhand who got in the way. Men galloped at a break-neck pace over rough ground pocked with prairie dog holes that could trip a horse and throw a rider. And Hezekiah was with them.

Lizzie was frantic for his safety, if not her own. But suddenly she was in danger, too. The lightning showed her that the pounding herds had swung direction. Roaring out of the night, the lead steers were headed for the camp and the wagons, where she stood in terror. No human afoot could outrun them. Another woman might have been rooted there in screaming horror. But Lizzie sprang toward the campfire and threw herself to the ground behind it, praying the cattle would part around the shield of flame.

She hugged the earth with her body pressed to it, her face in the dirt, as the stampede swept in, only yards away. The scatter of dirt clods and pelting stones rained over her, spattering her with mud. But she was safe from the grinding destruction that passed her by.

The men finally got the bunch turned in a wide, milling circle. Hezikiah rode back and found Lizzie unharmed. When the rain stopped and a count could be made by the morning's light, there were some forty steers lost. But the men and their horses were unhurt.

There were privations yet to face, though, and the weary miles that took strength and endurance merely to travel them. There were rivers to cross: six rivers before the trail ended in Kansas. And the spring weather that provided fresh grass for the cattle, the rains that gave water for the herds, also left the streams swollen and difficult.

Swimming the cattle was the only way the crossings could be made in some places. There were no ferries, no bridges, few trees that could be used to tie ropes to. Steers were driven upstream on one bank, so the swirling current would bring them down to the trail again on the opposite shore. Wagons and Lizzie's buggy had to be unpacked and floated over, and then repacked with weary laboring and a loss of hours, sometimes a full day, whenever the push north was halted by a river.

But Lizzie and Hezekiah made it through to trail's end and the railroad in Kansas. Lizzie Johnson Williams achieved her ambition of bringing her own herd up the Chisholm Trail. She sold her herd separately from Hezekiah's, bargaining shrewdly and interest-

ing buyers in the fattest steers for shipment to slaughter. The younger animals brought a higher price when sold to people who would use them for re-stocking northern ranches.

Lizzie came out of the deals with more money than Hezekiah did. But it was as man and wife, not as rival cattle king and queen, that they took the railroad to St. Louis for an earned vacation holiday. And with the dangers of the Chisholm Trail behind her, Lizzie blossomed out as an entirely feminine woman.

Lizzie's bobbing top knot vanished; it changed to soft-tumbling curls that fell to her shoulders. She traded her plain clothes for luxurious velvets and taffetas. A pair of gold-set diamond earrings of two carats each, a lustrous diamond hair ornament, and a sunburst pin containing eighty-four diamonds, sparklingly set off her appearance as she and Hezekiah joined in high social festivities.

They made several other trips up the trail in later years, and spent their winters traveling the country and visiting places as far away as Cuba. Lizzie prospered in real estate as well as in cattle.

When Hezekiah died in 1914, in El Paso, Lizzie grievingly brought him back to Austin for burial, paying what was then the staggering amount of six hundred dollars for his casket alone.

Her own death at the age of eighty-one followed his by ten years.

But the note which Lizzie scrawled across the bill from the undertaker, at the time Hezekiah passed away, was characteristic of the Texas cattle queen. Her schoolteacher's bookkeeping training made her check the amount carefuly. And across the bill she had paid for Hezekiah's expensive funeral, Lizzie Johnson Williams wrote, "I loved this old buzzard this much."

Coming up in the next issue of RANCH ROMANCES

HANGROPE FOR MY LOVE

Cresta's ruthless scheme was to marry an old man for his money . . . but her greed wouldn't let her stop there

A Magazine Length Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE GUN AND THE GRAVE

Westrom hated the high-hat Barnabys . . . but when the showdown came, only they could save him from death

An Exciting Novelette

By D. S. HALACY

OUTCAST'S CHANCE

Two women were making trouble for Johnny Ring. One he loved . . . and the other he would soon have to fight

A Western Short Story

By T. V. OLSEN

OUT OF THE CHUTES

IF YOU read our last column you already know that Casey Tibbs is the All-Around Cowboy Champion, having won $42,065 contesting in rodeos last year—about $4,000 more than anyone else.

It's nothing new for Casey to be the champ. In 1951 he was not only All-Around winner, but also top man in saddle bronc-riding and bareback. He's the only cowboy who ever held all three titles at once. In fact, only two other cowboys ever held both bronc-riding titles at once—Leonard Ward in 1934 and Bill Linderman in 1945.

This year Casey didn't win as many titles, but he won more money than he ever did before. Actually, he won more money than *anyone* ever did before, but it took some doing.

Many big-time cowboys drive as much as 62,000 miles a year, spend up to $3,000 on plane tickets, and work as many as four or five different rodeos running at the same time.

Casey, for example, during one 12-day period, entered five rodeos from coast to coast and won four of them.

How does he do it? Well, hang on and we'll take you on a whirlwind tour. The 12-day period began on a Thursday, when he won the saddle bronc and all-around titles in Puyallup, Wash. Friday he flew to Omaha for his first go-round at the big Ak-Sar-Ben show. Saturday he competed in both the afternoon and evening performances in St. Joseph, Mo. On Sunday he was back in Omaha for his second go-round there. Monday brought him to Albuquerque, N.M., where he slowed down long enough to spend the night and work the same show on Tuesday. He spent Wednesday and Thursday back in Omaha again, and then returned to Albuquerque to win the saddle bronc championship on Friday.

That's nine days so far. The next day, Saturday, Casey really began to travel, as far as New York City to enter the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. He went back to Omaha on Sunday, and with both the saddle and bareback championships from that show in his pocket, he flew back to New York, where he rode the bronc that gave him enough points for the Garden championship. "It was a photo finish," says Casey, "and I was real glad to stay in New York for a while."

Casey got an early start in rodeo because he was born on a ranch in Stanley County, South Dakota. Just about all the hands on the ranch were Tibbses, since there were ten children in the family, and Casey wasn't let off from any chores on account of being the youngest.

"When I was ten my father put me to work taming two-year-old colts," says Casey. "There was a lot of bronc-busting to be done, so I used to ride them to the one-room schoolhouse five miles away."

Casey entered his first rodeo when he was 14, and a year later he joined up with a Wild West Show. But he enjoyed competition for purses more than exhibition for wages, so he hit the rodeo circuit soon afterward. Two years later in 1947, he won fifth place in saddle bronc-riding in the final standings; the year after that he was third; and in 1949 he was the saddle champ. That year he won almost $16,000 in rodeo, and he has been climbing steadily ever since.

Casey, by the way, is his real name, and the only reason for it is that his father loved baseball and used to recite *Casey at the Bat.*

"He'd call me 'Mighty Casey,' whenever I made a good ride," Casey recalls. "I guess he got his way about naming me because Mother had just about run out of names by the time the tenth kid came along."

Adios,

THE EDITORS

The Second
Part of a Serial
by
TODHUNTER
BALLARD

GUNS of the LAWLESS

THE STORY SO FAR: Ruthless PETRY MUNGER breaks with his ineffectual partner, GILBERT GROVER, after Grover refuses to sell out his ranch to Munger. Their foreman, VANCE CLARK, sticks with Grover, though he loves VIRGINIA MUNGER. Clark beats Munger's lawyer, BRYCE AUSTIN, in court on the question of who shall retain water rights, but Austin and Munger outsmart him by filing on the land that provides access to the water. Clark threatens to shoot Munger's men if they get in his way, but Grover feels the problem can be talked out. Paying a visit to Munger's men ERNIE SYLVESTER and RAY PINKER, Grover is shot by Pinker. Clark and SHERIFF LEM STEWART ride to the rescue, but Pinker escapes. Clark learns later that Grover wants him, in the event of Grover's death, to marry his daughter, JUDY GROVER, and carry on the ranch. Judy, coldly resolved to keep on fighting, agrees to this. Actually, she is secretly in love with Clark.

PART TWO

THE news of Gilbert Grover's death shook Virginia Munger as nothing else ever had. As a child she had always looked up to him, although she had never really liked him. She had regarded the small man who spent so much time with his bird and rock collections as something of an eccentric, to be avoided when possible, but she had always been scrupulously polite to him.

Virginia was to a certain extent spoiled. Her blonde beauty attracted every man she met, but she realized now that none of them had interested her until Bryce Austin had appeared.

She looked at him now, standing before her in the narrow lobby, and experienced again that breathless eagerness which she had felt when she first saw him, the knowledge that no matter what this man should do she could neither resist him for long nor feel anger toward him.

"He can't be dead." She said this more to herself than to the lawyer. "He can't be dead—not Gilbert Grover."

Long ago Bryce Austin had taken the measure of this girl whom he intended to marry. He had studied her as thoroughly as he had ever studied an antagonist in a courtroom battle. Not that he did not love her in his own way, but Bryce Austin would never lower his guard completely to anyone.

"He is dead." He said it gently, but with a note of finality. "He tried to run Ray Pinker off the half section of land that Ernie Sylvester is filing on, and Ray wouldn't run."

She was silent, a little dazed, trying to readjust her thinking. "Bryce, when will all of this end?"

He knew that basically she did not approve of the action her father was taking in splitting from Rocking Chair ranch. He also knew that, if her father alone were involved, Virginia might well swing her sympathies back to Judy Grover and Vance Clark, for she feared her father but had never respected him. Yet Austin was confident that he could control her, that she would believe his interpretations.

He said, "I don't see how it can last much longer. Even before Gilbert Grover died, Rocking Chair had no chance to survive. Most of the crew went with your father, as they should have done, for he made the ranch what it was."

She spoke with a trace of bitterness. "I wish Father had never started this. I wish he had left things as they were."

"Don't blame your father." Bryce Austin could be very persuasive. "For years he carried the whole ranch operation alone."

"It was Gilbert Grover who gave him his first chance."

Austin came closer and took hold of both her arms, holding her thus, tightly enough so that she could feel the pressure. "Do you actually believe your father wouldn't have gotten ahead without Gilbert's help?"

She was forced by his nearness to look up at him. It was a trick he used purposely, to make her look up, to put her at a disadvantage.

She shook her head. "My father would have gotten ahead somehow."

"He carried Grover for a lot of years. He doubled the value of the ranch. He carried out his part of the bargain. But a man has to keep growing, Ginny, and Grover didn't want the operation to grow. He wanted to sit in his chair and let another man earn his living."

Everything he said was true, and she wanted to believe him.

"But Judy and Vance will probably go on fighting."

He was suddenly very tender, pulling her against him and holding her tight. "I know how you feel about them," he said. "In many ways this whole thing is harder on you than on anyone else."

She didn't answer.

"And I know you rescued Clark and Spain from the dry lake."

She stirred, trying to free herself, but his arms tightened.

"I was proud of you."

His tone warmed with emotion. No one in the world could sound more sincere than Bryce Austin. It was this ability on which he traded, this quality which he hoped might some day lead him to the governor's mansion, to the Senate in Washington.

His plans had been laid carefully. He would make Petry Munger the most powerful rancher in the state and, once this power was his, Munger should gladly help elect his future son-in-law the governor.

Virginia still struggled a little against this charm. "I wish I could believe that, Bryce. I've been trying to believe it. But you were there; you could have stopped them."

He pulled back as if offended. "Did you ever try to stop your father, or the gunmen he's hired? I argued, and Sylvester suggested that they put me afoot, along with Clark. Don't forget, Joe Spain had tried to kill Petry."

She sighed. She did not doubt that Spain had made such an attempt.

"And don't forget, they are the ones who have caused trouble from the first. When Grover took your father in as partner he needed help and, he said, a full partner. Naturally Petry thought he meant the land as well as the cattle. We've tried to fight honestly, but Vance Clark is too hot-headed. You know how he sought me out at the Palace and fought me."

She nodded slowly. She well remembered her own effort to keep Clark from going to that saloon.

"At least Gilbert Grover was not a firebrand. He had some common sense, which is more than I can say for Vance Clark."

She stirred. Deep within her was the knowledge that she should rise to Vance's defence, but she remained quiet under the spell of the man before her.

"So I'm going to suggest something to you. I'm going to ask that you ride out and talk to Judy Grover. If she'll listen to anyone, it should be you. You're as near a sister as she ever had."

Virginia nodded.

"Tell her you're shocked by her father's unnecessary death. Tell her you'll do anything in your power to prevent further bloodshed, that you'll force your father to pay her anything within reason for the ranch. Make her see that if she wants to save Vance Clark's life she had better sell out."

"I'll do it." The last words had caught Virginia's attention. "We've got to keep Vance from going on the warpath." She turned and went upstairs for her riding clothes.

Afterward, Bryce Austin walked with her to the livery and helped her mount. Then, as she rode down Elkhead's main street, he returned to his office. Petry Munger had been standing at the full-length window, looking down upon the street. Since leaving Rocking Chair he had been living at the hotel and using the lawyer's office as headquarters.

"How'd she take it?"

Bryce Austin removed his hat and hung it carefully upon the tree, then shucked out of his long-tailed black coat and placed it on a hanger. He was a man fastidious about his appearance, and Munger annoyed him with his sloppy ways. But Austin knew that he did not belong in the desert, and if he hoped to go anywhere in local politics he needed Munger, or a man like Munger, to push him up.

He masked his irritation by saying, "Ginny's riding out to talk to the Grover girl. I haven't much hope of what she'll accomplish with Judy, who hates her guts."

Munger was honestly surprised. "I thought they liked each other."

The lawyer shrugged. "Judy's jealous of Virginia."

"Then why did you send her out there?"

Austin's voice tightened. "To talk to Clark, you fool. He's in love with her. If Clark can be talked to by anyone, it will be her. She just might talk him into quitting."

"To hell with Clark. What can he do—one man?"

"I don't know." Austin was speaking slowly, as if thinking aloud. "Clark isn't an average man. I'd feel much better if he had ridden out of the country, or were dead."

VANCE CLARK came into the kitchen of the Grover house to find Judy at the stove already, preparing breakfast. He sat down at the table without speaking, watching the girl move between the cupboard and the stove. She turned twice to look at him. There was no sign of grief on her small face, and her actions were flatly matter-of-fact. The events of the previous day might not have happened.

She placed the stack of cakes before him, filled his cup, and sat down. "Don't you think we'd better do some planning?"

He did not meet her eyes. "What kind of planning?"

"What we're going to do about the ranch."

He said, "The cattle are all up on North Mountain. They can't stray as long as the hot weather holds, so I don't have to worry about them. Petry's cutting the hay, so I don't need to worry about that."

She said a little tartly, "You sound like a man who doesn't have too much on his mind."

He ate in silence for several minutes before answering. "I spent half the night figuring where I'd go if I were Ray Pinker. I don't think he'll head back for town. Lem Stewart made it pretty plain that he'd arrest him, and I don't think either Petry or Austin is quite ready to tangle with the sheriff yet. He can't cross the dry lake in any comfort. I think he's on North Mountain. The safest place for him will be around Joetree's place. They don't like us very well up there."

She watched him silently.

He continued, "I'll see if I can pick up Ray's sign and trail him, but my hunch still holds that he'll be at North Mountain."

She rose suddenly, came around the table, and put one small hand on his shoulder. He looked up, startled, and saw that color had risen under her dark skin and that her eyes were almost black.

"Why, Judy."

She said, "Maybe I'd better sell the ranch. Surely Petry would pay something to be rid of us."

He was taken aback. The thought had not occurred to him.

"I didn't sleep much last night either," she continued. "I lay awake thinking. It isn't fair to put you in this spot. Father took an unfair advantage in asking you to stand by the ranch, in asking you—" her voice broke for the barest instant— "to marry me."

He rose and took both her shoulders in his big hands. "Judy."

She met his eyes with an effort.

"Is the marriage part worrying you?" His voice was soft.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Forget it. Your father only wanted to be sure I helped you. Don't worry; I don't need to be married to you or have half of Rocking Chair either. You couldn't get me out of this country, until I've found Ray Pinker and forced out of him the real story of your father's death. I'm going to make him admit that Petry Munger hired him to kill your father."

He let her go then and stalked to the door, turning there to say, "You might put some jerky and bisquits and coffee in a bag. I may be riding for quite a spell."

After he had left her she stood for a long minute beside the table, the feeling growing within her that he was riding to his death. Yet she did not cry, and after the long minute she turned to prepare the food pack. With it, she stepped outside to where he was saddling. He mounted and rode toward her, taking the pack and fastening it behind the saddle. Then with a wordless nod he rode out of the yard.

Judy Grover stood still, oppressed suddenly by a sense of being utterly alone. It was, in a manner, a delayed reaction, as though until this minute the impact of her father's death had not struck her fully. She sat down on the step, her eyes looking at the wide yard and the mountain rising behind it, without really seeing either. Finally she rose, moved in to her father's room, and sat in his chair. She lowered her head on the table and, for the first time, tears came.

The sound of a horse coming into the yard disturbed her. Then there were light steps on the porch and Virginia's voice calling, "Judy, Judy, where are you?"

For a moment Judy sat frozen. Then a quick rush of deep, unreasoning anger lifted her to her feet. But even in that moment of intense emotion she stood still until she could say clearly, "In here, in Father's office."

When Virginia appeared in the doorway Judy managed to meet her as if nothing had happened. "It's nice of you to come," she said. Inside she felt frozen, as if the frost sheathed the hatred she felt.

It seemed to Judy that her dislike ran back to that first day when Virginia had come to the ranch. Virginia was older by two years,

and large for her age, and she had ordered Judy about with the cruelty all children sometimes show to their juniors.

Virginia, as far as Judy knew, was unconscious of this resentment. She had been kind, at times too kind, and when they had grown old enough for dances she had made a point of taking Judy with her, of almost forcing one and then another of her numerous admirers to escort the ranch owner's daughter.

Virginia was coming across the room now, her hands outstretched, her blue eyes soft with unshed tears. "I just heard, this morning." She put her arms about Judy and pulled her close. "I—" her voice broke and Judy knew that she was crying.

OF THE two, Judy was much the calmer. She gently broke Virginia's grip and stepped back, saying in a controlled voice, "Tears never solved anything, Ginny. Don't waste them here."

The older girl stopped crying, but her voice was still husky. "But Judy, what are you going to do?"

"I'll get along."

"I never understood you." Virginia was almost wailing. "Even as a little girl you never acted like other people."

Judy thought bitterly, but I understood you, and myself too, only too well. You've never in your life looked beneath the surface, to see what makes people as they are. You took things at face value and enjoyed yourself. You aren't really selfish, for to be selfish you must know the meaning of the word, and you never did. You never in your life wondered whether the people around you were as happy as you were.

Aloud she said, "I thank you for coming."

"I wanted to help. I wanted to ask about the funeral."

"There will be no funeral. We buried him last night."

"But Judy, that isn't civilized."

"Civilized." In spite of herself Judy's temper slipped. "Was it civilized for Ray Pinker and Ernie Sylvester to murder him?"

"Now Judy, listen." The distress in Virginia's tone was very plain. "I know how you feel, but—"

"You know how I feel?" The dark eyes were blazing suddenly. "You know how I feel! How could you know? Has your father been murdered? Have your hay fields been stolen? Has the ranch that has been in your family for three generations been split and threatened?"

Virginia stared at her. She had seen Judy in tantrums as a child, but never anything like this. There was something cold and deadly about her despite the angry passion of her voice.

Virginia said, "I'm only trying to prevent further bloodshed."

"You'd better try. Vance rode out three hours ago and soon there'll be another shooting."

"You mean he's gone already?"

"What did you expect, that he would wait here like a target until your father's hired killers came and gunned him down?"

"Judy—" Virginia Munger was growing angry— "I can't help unless you get a grip on yourself."

"I've got a grip on myself—" Judy almost spat the words— "or I'd drive you off the place with a whip. I don't know why you came here. I don't know why you don't stay on your own side."

"Look." The older girl made a little gesture of helplessness. "I didn't start this fight, Judy, and I didn't approve of a lot of the things that were done. You were always the best friend I had."

Judy stayed silent, realizing that Virginia was telling the truth, that the older girl probably had considered her a good friend.

"I'm only trying to help you. Don't you know that I was the one who saved Vance and Joe Spain from the dry lake?"

"You'd better go." All the fire had gone from Judy's voice, leaving it dull and tired. "Forget what I said. Just leave me alone."

At once the anger vanished from the other girl. "I can't, until I say what I came to say. You can't carry on here alone. You haven't got a crew, or winter feed. I'll make Father buy you out. I'll make him give you a fair price."

"So that's it. Your father is using you to try to trick me into selling."

"Father doesn't even know I'm here. He would probably have forbidden me to come. Bryce Austin suggested it. Bryce doesn't want bloodshed any more than I do."

The mention of the lawyer rekindled Judy's anger, but she said only, "Rocking Chair is not for sale as long as Vance and I are alive."

Virginia's voice sharpened. "Don't you think you'd better talk to Vance about that? He's the one who will be shot at."

"Do you think Vance would listen to me?"

"He'll listen to me," Ginny Munger said with confidence.

She was utterly unprepared for the reaction which her words caused. "You leave him alone," Judy said.

"Leave him alone? What are you talking about?"

Judy Grover caught the other girl's arm with both hands, shaking her. "Leave him alone. Haven't you done enough to Vance?"

"Done to him?"

"You led him on. I've watched you for years, playing fast and loose with him, like a fisherman holding a trout at the end of a line. You kept him around as long as you had any use for him, and when your fancy Eastern lawyer came along you kicked Vance aside."

"Judy—"

"Don't you Judy me. I know more about you than you know about yourself, and I don't like one single thing about you."

"Judy, that's not true. I didn't lead Vance on."

"I suppose you didn't even know he was in love with you."

"Well, I knew he was fond of me."

"But you were too busy thinking of yourself and your own feelings to give any thought to how he might feel."

"I can't help it if people like me."

"Stop it."

The older girl was watching intently. "Why Judy, you're in love with him yourself. You never said anything. I never guessed."

"Stop it." Judy's color had risen. "Stop it."

"But I—"

"Get out of here, and don't come back. Don't ever set foot on Rocking Chair again."

VANCE CLARK had ridden directly toward Stinking Water, taking the shortest trail across the rising shoulder of North Mountain. He came down the canyon carefully until he could see the pole line of the new fence above Ernie Sylvester's claim.

Dismounting, he moved downward, looking for sign. He found it without difficulty, then got his horse and followed the trail upward. At mid-afternoon he halted beside one of the lower springs, studying the marks stamped in the wet earth around the tank. At the tank's edge Pinker had stepped down. His hand prints were plain where he had lowered himself for a drink of the cold water. Clark had his own lunch then, and again rode upward, till he dropped into the shelf-like trace of the old mine road.

In the early seventies copper had been discovered on the mountain, and a quarter of a million investors' dollars had gone into making the road over which slow-moving ox teams had hauled the rich ore to the smelter, before the mine had played out.

Vance turned up the road, and it was near full dark when he saw the half-dozen yellow lights of Dark Rock flickering before him. Once this had been a town of nearly a thousand people, but now only a few of the old buildings were still occupied, and the rest were crumbling away. Side thoroughfares had climbed upward on both wings of the cut nature had made in the mountain rock, but these were now brush covered, caved in, and littered with tumbled rock.

The north end of the hotel porch had sagged to a forty degree angle, and one of the posts jutted out across the ancient hitching rack. There were no horses at the rack, no one on the dark street as Vance stepped from the saddle, tied his mount and, crossing the drooping porch, came gingerly into the old barroom.

Only one of the swinging lamps was lighted, and the big room had but four occupants. Three played poker at a rear table, and Joetree leaned on his own bar, watching the door. He was a big man, run to lard over a powerful frame and heavy muscles. His sleeves were rolled and his arms, hairy as a bear's, lay crossed on the bar like two prone

tree trunks. Wattles ran down to almost hide his chin line, and his nose was larger. But his mouth was startlingly small, and pursed like a child's.

Only his eyes moved as Vance Clark crossed directly to the bar, rested his hands upon it, and gave the card players a long look. He knew how little liked Rocking Chair was in this dying town, and, without being able to prove it, he knew that the handful of men who still grubbed in the old mine, taking out their occasional ton of ore for its gold and silver content only, helped themselves to Rocking Chair beef.

He turned as Joetree said in his curiously high voice, "Hear you and Petry are having a mite of trouble."

Vance Clark knew that he was being baited, and he thought quickly how much difference it made that Rocking Chair was split. In the old days Joetree and the rest had walked softly around the ranch crew.

But he only said, "Give me a drink, have one yourself, and give the others one."

Joetree set a single glass on the bar and put a bottle beside it. "None of us feel like drinking." Malice bordering on hate burned brightly in his little eyes now.

Vance Clark moved slowly. He reached out with his left hand and caught the front of Joetree's shirt. The fat man straightened, straining against the pressure Vance was using in an effort to drag him across the bar. Their strength was about equal, but the shirt's wasn't. It parted with a loud ripping noise, splitting down Joetree's back.

But Vance did not release his grip. He gave the shirt an extra jerk, tearing it free of the collar and pulling it forward so that the rolled sleeves hauled Joetree's arms together. Then, still holding the shirt, he drove his right fist into Joetree's prominent nose.

The fat man yelled. A chair slammed over at the card table, and Jonas Garbo was on his feet. Vance let go of Joetree's shirt and swung half around. The gun at his hip was suddenly in his hand and his face had a tight, pinched look.

"You want some of this, Jonas?"

Garbo's hand was on his gun, but he didn't lift it from the holster. He froze there, standing beside the table, a colorless man in faded clothes, his mouth a little open to show discolored teeth. Slowly he let his hand fall away from the gun. Slowly he squatted back to retrieve his chair and slowly sank into it, his eyes never leaving Vance's face, as if he found something fascinating in the tight, fixed expression.

Vance said with deep contempt, "You're a bunch of rats. But listen to me. Gilbert Grover is dead. Ray Pinker killed him, and Ray's on the mountain somewhere. I want him. I'm going to get him, and it will be better for all of you if you help me."

Joetree was dabbing at his bleeding nose with his torn shirt. "You've got a strange way of making friends, Vance. You're pretty rough."

Vance Clark turned on him a contempt he made no effort to hide. "There are only two things you thieves understand, and friendship isn't either of them. You either laugh at a man or you crawl to him. Now, start crawling. Where's Ray Pinker?"

"Never heard of him."

CLARK balanced the gun in his hand as if trying to make sure whether it were heavy enough for his purpose. "Come out from behind that bar."

Joetree watched him. The men at the rear table watched him. He could almost feel the intensity of their gaze on his back.

"Come out." The gun steadied. It was looking directly at the mat of hair which covered Joetree's big chest.

The man swore at him. He came slowly along the bar to the break, like an unwilling, grouchy dog minds its master through fear and not through love.

"Get down on your knees."

Joetree stared at him through eyes which were filled with disbelief. Joetree had ruled Dark Rock with a heavy hand, and in his own slow way he was proud of his position. He knew clearly that once he had been forced to crawl to Vance Clark's feet his power would be gone.

"The hell with you."

The gun in Vance's hand seemed to explode of its own volition. The heavy bullet

cut a neat round hole in the scuffed boards between Joetree's booted feet.

The big man stared downward, then said in a dry, husking voice, "He's up at the old mine, in the shaft house. He came last night."

Vance said quietly. "I'm going after him. Anyone I see move on the canyon site will be shot."

He turned then and went out into the darkness of the street. Behind him there was not a single sound from the room he had just quitted. He stopped beyond the edge of the shadowed porch, knowing that there were other men in the dark night, probably drawn from their holes by the noise of the shot. But he saw no movement.

Silently he crossed the dust, aware of each whisper in the night. There was no moon, and the star-studded sky could only be seen through the wedge between the canyon's upflung wings. Only a little light filtered down into the street. Vance had the sensation that a thousand ghosts watched his progress.

He climbed the rising grade of the street until he saw, above him, the spider-like web of the old tramway which had carried a hundred swinging buckets of ore to the waiting ox teams below.

The cable still stretched its sagging length, but the buckets had fallen and lay rusting in the obscuring brush. He almost stumbled over one of them before he reached the swelling line of the old dump, a high, man-made hump across the canyon side, where the miners had spilled their thousands of tons of worthless county rock.

He climbed. The dump was so old that it was packed nearly as hard as the natural canyon ground. He made as little noise as possible, but in the darkness it was tricky. He dislodged more than one rock before he breasted the dump, came around a corner of the sagging sorting shed, and saw a flicker of light within.

At once he was motionless. Then he moved on carefully, creeping forward, making each step an individual action until he had come up to the rough boards of the shack. The door had fallen from its hinges, and someone had hung a tattered blanket to mask the opening. He paused outside, took a deep breath, drew the gun from its holster, and pushed aside the blanket.

Ray Pinker lay on a pile of other blankets in the far corner. He was asleep, unintentionally, for he had not removed his boots. He stirred as Vance stepped into the room, and started to sit up.

"That you, Ernie?" he asked. Then he saw who it was and froze.

"Get up."

"Vance!" Pinker was blinking owlishly in the light.

"Get up and be careful."

The man swung his feet to the floor, and sat stiffly on the edge of the bunk. He looked at his holstered gun, hanging by its belt from a peg in the wall, as if calculating his chances.

"Don't try it. All I want is an excuse to kill you."

Pinker stood up, looking curiously shrunken. "Vance, listen."

Vance Clark's tone was suddenly savage. "I don't want to hear it. You killed one of the few decent men I've ever known."

"But I didn't." The words were almost a wail. "I didn't shoot Gil Grover. Ernie did."

Vance Clark glowled, "Don't lie, Ray."

"I'm not lying." The man sounded desperate. "I was building fence when Gil rode up. He he'd his rifle on me, and told me to dig out the poste. There was a shot, and Ernie ran toward us. The bullet knocked Gil off his horse, but it didn't kill him. He made a rush for the canyon wall and began to climb."

"You'll have to tell a better story than that."

"I can't." Ray Pinker sounded hopeless as if he realized that nothing he could say would do any good, that death was standing here with him in this rotting mine shack.

Something in his very hopelessness made Vance say, "All right, tell me the rest. Why did you run?"

"I didn't. I was hiding in the brush while you talked to Ernie, while the others rode up. After they all left, Petry talked to me. He didn't want Ernie accused. The homestead is in Ernie's name. He offered me a thousand dollars in gold to drift out of the country. I've been waiting here for it to be sent up."

"Come on. Bring the lantern."

The man said, "Where are we going?"

"Down to Elkhead, to tell your story to the sheriff."

Pinker wet his lips.

"It's either that or die here."

Pinker hesitated, then picked up the lantern and started for the doorway. As he stepped outside, a shot hammered from the dump. He stopped, the lantern dropped to the ground and smashed, extinguishing itself, and Ernie Sylvester's high yell rang through the night.

"That was Pinker. Vance must still be inside."

THE shot caught Vance entirely unprepared, but instinctive reaction carried him back across the room to where the old haulage tunnel opened in the far wall like the gaping mouth of a cave.

In the darkness his bootheel caught on the rusty rail which had carried the ore cars. He fell heavily, and the act probably saved his life, for outside half a dozen guns exploded. The heavy slugs tore through the weathered planks of the shack's walls.

There was a shout from the dump, another volley, and then, in the sudden weighted silence, the sound of Ernie Sylvester's voice. "Two of you rush the door. We'll cover you."

Vance was on his hands and knees, crawling over the rough ties which supported the rails. A good two inches of icy water ran down the tunnel floor, and he was soaked as he scrambled through it.

There was a twist in the tunnel a hundred feet back from the entrance, as the drift made an angular turn following the vein, and he ran almost headlong into the rotting timbering of the wall. Behind him came a confused mutter of shouts, then the flare of a match. He splashed around the bend, and drew a shot which thudded wetly into the soggy planking behind him.

The walls of the tunnel and the water combined to give their excited voices an eerie quality, as though they came from another world. Suddenly Vance had a rush of panic. It was something he had never experienced before, something he did not understand. He had been afraid before, of course, as any man with imagination has been. His fears now sprang from the fact that he was blocked, caught underground, by men who had nothing on their minds except killing him.

He was trapped alone, in the darkness, threatened not only by their guns but by the fact that the timber was rotten, that the moisture had for years eaten at the standing rock walls, so that at any second they might give way and cave in.

His first impulse was to call out, offering surrender, but the urge lasted for moments only. He turned, moving cautiously, deeper and deeper into the hill. He had traveled over a hundred yards when his groping fingers encountered the rungs of a rising ladder. He had no idea where it led. The blackness above him was intense, and he dared not use a match.

He paused, listening. Behind him, near the tunnel's mouth, he heard the splash of slowly moving feet, and caught the glint of light. They were coming in after him. He climbed, spurred upward by the danger of their approach, yet he took his time testing the strength of each new rung before trusting his weight to it. Three times the cross pieces broke under him, and once he only saved himself from falling by grasping the ladder's uprights and dangling while he scrambled for footing.

But he reached the top finally, forty feet above the tunnel floor, and climbed up through what seemed to be a hole cut vertically into the solid rock. Here he risked a match, and found himself in a room-like opening perhaps twenty feet wide and nearly fifty long, which had been stoped out along the vein.

The hole through which he had crawled was an ore chute, left for the purpose of sliding the broken quartz down into the tunnel. He stood at the rim peering downward, hearing the splashing of his pursuers' feet, then turned along the length of the stope.

There was a weirdness about being chased underground, but, surprisingly, Vance's first panic was gone. He lit another match, found a second ladder, and climbed into a second stope. The vein had apparently pitched at an angle toward the south, so that the foot wall

slanted upward as he walked on an incline of nearly thirty degrees.

He climbed again and yet again. It was hot in the upper rooms and the air was dead, making breathing difficult. He wondered if he would ever find his way out.

He lit other matches and found other ladders, and between them groped forward along the sharp rock walls until he became conscious of a downdraft of fresher air. His next match flickered, almost going out, and he cupped it in his hand. Then he stopped, for instead of the ladder at the far end of the room he saw a mound of earth and, above it in the roof, an irregular hole through which he caught a glimpse of distant stars.

The hole, for it was little more, had been broken through onto the outcropping, probably by accident. This had been a long time ago, and dirt and rubbish had fallen in, piling on the floor. He scrambled onto this pile and, from its top, could reach up to the edge of the broken earth and get hold of a rock.

He felt the rock slip and dropped back, ducking aside as it thudded to the earth beside him. He swore softly. To be so close, and yet so far, from freedom! It would be the height of irony if he failed to get out now.

He struck his last match and found a root, both its ends embedded in the earth. He tested it cautiously, swinging up on it. For one sickening moment it seemed to give. Then it held and he raised himself, chinning as on a bar, twisting his body upward until he got one booted leg clear of the hole. His toe found the edge of a boulder and hooked around it, and a moment later he lay flat on the solid outside earth, resting, soaked with nervous sweat.

Then he started down into the town. There were still lights in the mine buildings, and he wondered grimly how long Ernie Sylvester's crew would pursue their search for him within the old workings. He only hoped that they were all at the mine, that none of them had remained in the town below.

HE CAME down the canyon side and down one of the old side streets, and at last stopped before the hotel, frowning. His horse was no longer in sight, nor were there any other horses on the street. Slowly he started up the collapsing steps, pulling his gun and spinning the cylinder to make certain that it was not dirt clogged.

Joetree was still behind the bar. Half a dozen riders were in the room, but Vance Clark saw no Double M men. His gun in his hand, he kicked open the door and stepped in.

Joetree's piggish eyes widened as he saw who it was. "How'd you get out of the mine?"

Vance Clark allowed himself a thin, faint grin. "Never mind that. I'm hard to kill, and Rocking Chair is hard to kill. Gil Grover is dead, and not one of you understood what a friend you had in him. As long as he lived he wouldn't let us run you thieving dogs out. But now you're through, as of tonight."

A wicked light danced in the fat man's eyes. "You'll do well to look at your hole card. You have no horse, and you are one man. Ernie Sylvester would thank any of us for shooting you. If you will pardon my saying so, you're a dead man. There is no way out."

"Isn't there?"

Deliberately Clark raised his gun and sent a bullet through the glass bowl at the bottom of the swinging lamp. It shattered, and spraying oil seemed to fill the air, dropping to the floor. The hot wick fell into a small pool, which blazed up quickly and licked at the worn, dry boards.

With a startled oath, Joetree jumped forward to stamp out the blaze. Vance's bullet cut the floor in front of his feet. "Keep back."

The fat man stopped. He stared at Vance with eyes which were not quite sane. "Damn you."

"There's more than one way to drive out coyotes," Vance Clark said.

He held them under his gun until he was certain the fire could not be controlled, then turned and, vaulting across the porch, vanished in the shadows. Behind him one building and then the next caught, until the whole sorry town was burning fiercely.

The news that Vance Clark had burned the old mining town ran through the country. Much to the surprise of Elkhead's citizens, Cray Joetrees appeared and preferred charges against Vance.

"He had no reason to burn my town," he

said, as he sat in Lem Stewart's office. "My grandpappy laid out that townsite; it was my property. I want something done."

Bryce Austin stood at the window. "My client wishes to swear out a warrant for Vance Clark's arrest. Arson will do at the moment. Later we might think up something else—perhaps Pinker's murder."

"Then Pinker is dead?" The sheriff's tone was cold.

Bryce Austin bit his lip, but he ignored the words. "We also intend to start civil suit to recover for the damage Clark caused."

Lem Stewart said, "So that's it. I couldn't figure Joetree coming in here of his own volition. I've a hunch that you went to him as soon as you heard about the fire, since Vance will inherit a piece of Rocking Chair. Joetree. I hope Petry and Austin are paying you well to make trouble for the ranch."

Bryce Austin's handsome face flushed. "That's a pretty serious charge, Sheriff. You're supposed to enforce the law impartially."

Then Stewart turned his head. "Sonny, I've been a peace officer for nearly fifty years. You don't need to tell me my business."

"Then you'll serve the papers on Vance if we get them?"

"If I can find him."

For a moment their eyes locked. Then Bryce Austin jerked his head toward the door. "Come on, Joetree." He went out, the fat man following him, for all the world like some overgrown, stupid dog.

An hour later Lem Stewart lifted his old body into the saddle and headed his horse out across the shoulder of the mountain toward Rocking Chair. In his pocket was a warrant for Vance Clark's arrest for maliciously burning the mining camp. With it was a notice of a civil suit between Joetree and Clark for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, representing the estimated value of the destroyed property.

In spite of himself, Lem Stewart grinned at the figure. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a ghost town! But his smile faded. This was not a joke. He also carried a restraining order to keep Judy Grover and Vance Clark from disposing of any property held by them until the cases were heard.

A dull, quiet rage filled Lem Stewart. He had thought that he was too old for deep anger, but the thought of Bryce Austin seared through all his defenses. He sighed and turned his horse into the Rocking Chair yard, rode to the porch, and stepped down heavily. Before he was on the ground the front door opened and Judy Grover stood in the aperture looking down at him.

"Why, Uncle Lem."

He sighed again, climbed the three steps, and extended the papers to her silently. Her dark eyes reminded him of her dead father. She took the papers and glanced at them, then turned and led the way into the coolness of the house. She seated the sheriff in the chair that had been her father's, and brought him a glass of cool water from the olla. Only then did she speak.

"What's this all about, Uncle Lem?"

The sheriff set down the empty glass regretfully and wiped the tips of his drooping mustache. "A nasty business," he said. "It looks like Bryce Austin and Petry Munger are still pushing." He went on to tell her about the burning of the mining camp, and then of Joetree's suit and the warrant for Vance's arrest.

WHEN he had finished there was deep silence in the room. Judy held the papers in her hand as if afraid they might bite. "It isn't fair," she said vehemently. "Isn't the law supposed to protect people?"

The old man was troubled. Deep in his heart he had to agree that the law certainly seemed to be working on the wrong side here. But he had given his whole life to upholding the written statutes, and he couldn't stop now.

His voice was weak as he spoke. "You're young, Judy. You're coming up against life for the first time, and life is cruel."

She said steadily, "I don't know about life, but I know that my father is dead and Vance is out on the mountain like a hunted animal. If Petry's men catch him, you don't think they'll bring him in alive, do you?"

The sheriff was silent.

"But they won't get him," she said fiercely. "And if they do, I'll personally shoot down

each and every one of them."

Lem Stewart was watching her. "Vance means an awful lot to you, doesn't he, girl?"

She said simply, "He's all I have left."

Stewart did not carry the subject further, but he was adjusting his thinking. He had always supposed that Vance belonged to Virginia Munger. It had never occurred to him that Judy Grover was interested in Clark. He thought now, if Clark is blind to her feeling, if he fails to return it, she'll be hurt worse than she had already been.

Aloud he said, "I can't advise you what to do, Judy. I've got to serve you with the order restraining you from disposing of any property to which Vance may have a claim."

"I have no intention of disposing of the ranch, but I'd like to know how Bryce Austin found out so soon that my father left half the ranch to Vance."

The sheriff nodded. "I wondered some myself, so I asked a few questions. It seems that, before your father rode out to Stinking Water, he stopped and left a copy of his will with Hoerwitz, the banker, for safekeeping. Bryce Austin is attorney for the bank."

She said bitterly, "Isn't there one thing in this country that sneak doesn't have his long fingers in?"

She broke off, interrupted by the sound of a horse coming into the yard. For a moment neither of them moved. Then Judy reached into the desk drawer at her side and pulled out Gil Grover's heavy gun. It was not loaded; it had not been fired for years. But Lem Stewart did not know that.

"Judy."

"Don't move." The heavy barrel was steady on his chest. "Don't make me kill you, Uncle Lem."

Stewart did not move. Judy raised her voice. "Is that you, Vance?"

There was a faint answer.

"Get away. Stewart is here, with a warrant for your arrest."

In the yard there was silence, then the steady drum of hoofs as Vance Clark turned and rode out of the ranch.

From a vantage point a good half mile above the yard, Vance watched Lem Stewart's departure. But he was too old a hand in the ways of the country to ride down at once. He trusted Lem Stewart as much as he trusted any man on earth, but he also knew the sheriff thoroughly, knew that, no matter where the old man's sympathies lay, he had never shirked his duty in fifty years.

He watched, his horse back in the timber, himself squatted on the small ridge which gave him a clear view of the house. He was about convinced that Stewart had indeed headed back toward town and was not circling in an effort to trap him, when he saw Judy leave the porch and cross to the corral.

He watched her rope a horse, saddle it, and swing gracefully up, and knew a moment's admiration as she rode out of the yard. He had seen her ride out thus a thousand times, but never before had it seemed ominous. He searched his mind for the reason, and decided that never before had he felt responsible for her, although he had taught her to ride.

Now it was the girl against the world. Not until she had headed south and become lost to view in a cross canyon did he even wonder where she was heading. The sun was well down and, while it was a good two hours until dark, he could not imagine what Judy was up to—unless she was looking for him.

He turned back to his horse, mounted, and dropped off the ridge, still wary, for Lem Stewart might be lurking in the rough country to the west. But he saw nothing of the sheriff as he came down and picked up the trail the girl had made.

He urged his horse forward, expecting as he topped each intervening rise to come in sight of her. But he did not catch her. The print of her horse was plain, and it finally dawned on him, as she continued south, that she was riding toward Stinking Water.

He frowned, remembering small things which he had hardly noticed at the time. He recalled that she had been carrying her rifle when she left the house, and that she had shoved it into the boot before mounting.

This was not like Judy. At times she had carried her small caliber revolver but, unless she were hunting, he could not recall her having carried a rifle before.

He spurred his horse forward, filled suddenly with a strong forebodding. What was

she intending? Had she decided to take the law into her own hands and ride after Ernie Sylvester?

HE CLIMBED the ridge and took the trail which led downward to the distant hot springs. The sun had dropped now until it was lost below the rim of the desert sink far to the west, but the light lingered. He hauled up abruptly, realizing that he had not checked Judy's tracks for the last several miles.

The trail was not heavily traveled, and the marks he and she had made when they brought her father's body home were still plain. But the tracks he had been following from the ranch were not visible.

He dismounted, scanning the scarred dust. The right front shoe of the bay she rode carried a bar which he himself had put on to protect a cracked hoof. He stood for a long minute, then lifted himself back into the saddle. He was tired. He had had only an hour's sleep in some brush high above the old mining town, and he had been in the saddle for nearly nine hours.

He turned back, watching the trailside for a good three miles until he saw where she had swung into a side draw. He dismounted to be sure, but her tracks, although faint, showed on the stony ground. He followed them. Darkness was coming rapidly now, like a spreading blanket, filling the hollows first and then sending long fingers of its shadows creeping up the rising ground, until only the peaks far above him were still bathed in the late afterglow.

He lost her tracks finally, but the draw continued downward. He followed it as a matter of course, realizing that it would bring him out on the bench three or four miles to the west of the hot springs. It was full dark before he dropped low enough to see the faint yellow lights from the windows of the line camp cabin above the hay fields.

Here he halted, undecided, not knowing which way to turn. It seemed pointless to ride on. He did not know whether the girl had swerved right toward the distant town, or left toward the hay camp. If she were riding to Elkhead, this was certainly a roundabout way to come. He could not think of any reason that would bring her to the hay camp, unless she had some crazy notion of facing Ernie Sylvester.

He turned finally toward the cabin. If she had ridden toward town she would be in little danger, but at Stinking Water anything might happen. He had covered half the distance to the cabin when something to the right of it and beyond it caught his attention. For an instant he thought it was someone walking across the freshly cut fields with a lantern. Then the flickering flame spurted up, and he swore hoarsely. Someone was firing one of the hay stacks.

The flame crawled up slowly, as if only half willing to ignite the cured hay. Then another flame bloomed to the left, a hundred yards beyond the first. Someone was burning Petry Munger's hay.

He knew who it was without being told, and he cursed her under his breath for the chance she was taking. But he had to admit, even as he pushed his horse into motion, that Judy had chosen the one way to fight Munger on his own ground.

If the hay were gone, Munger would have lost one of his trump cards. He would be no better prepared to face the winter than Rocking Chair was. And there would be little reason for him to drive his herd across the sink from South Mountain, wearing the animals down by a three-day, feedless drive when there was no hay at the end of it.

A third flame flared into life. The first stack was now blazing like a huge bonfire, lighting the whole upper end of the meadow. The men in the cabin must be seeing the light by now, and Vance shifted his attention toward the building. Any danger to the girl would come from there. He swung his horse half around, changing his direction and jerking his rifle out of the boot.

At least he could give her this much protection. He was not a moment too soon, either, for, as he came forward in the half light thrown up from the distant burning stacks, he saw the cabin door open and three men appear.

His shot was purposely high, the bullet thudding into the logs above the door. He was too far away and the light was too poor for

him to see their expressions as they turned, but the high, startled yell which rose up through the night was a fair indication of their surprise.

They dived for the safety of the building, and the door slammed. He drove a bullet against its heavy planking as an added warning for them to hold their place indoors. There was a rear entrance, and he knew that he could not cover both doors. But he had gained precious minutes. He twisted, driving toward the huge field where a fifth stack had just burst into flame, calling Judy's name as he rode, to let her know who it was.

BEHIND him there was a shot and then another. He judged that the men he had driven to cover had run through the house and spilled out the rear door toward the corral. It would be a matter of minutes only before they were in the saddle. He had to get Judy out of there.

The girl turned to look at him. He could see her plainly now in the light of the burning hay. There were yet two stacks unfired, and after a brief glance in his direction she spurred her horse at them.

He swung in the saddle and sent two hopeless shots after the men who were racing for the corral. He did not expect to strike anyone, but in the brassy light of the leaping fires he had the satisfaction of seeing one of them hit the dust and then crawl crab-like toward the pole fence.

He swung back and rode toward where the girl had dismounted beside one of the remaining stacks. She was having trouble with her horse. The animal had been spooked by the rising flames and the eerie light they cast.

She was still trying to quiet him as Clark rode up and flung himself out of the saddle, tossing her his reins and snatching the handful of matches from her fingers. No words passed between them. He ran to the stack and pulled out half a dozen handfuls of loose hay.

His first match flared and died in the wind. Behind him he heard the sound of horses. He knew that he had almost no time, but he forced himself to move slowly, striking the

(Turn page)

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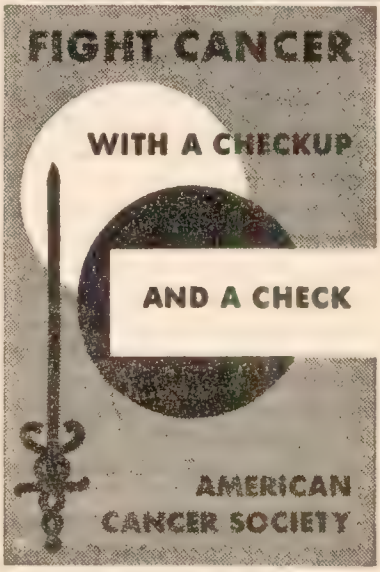

match and sheltering the little flame in his cupped hands until it caught soldily on the stick, then carefully thrusting it under the stalks of dried grass. They blazed up quickly, only to fade. He pressed them closer together against the tiny flame, and saw the matted grass catch, the fire began to spread, until the flame, nearly a foot high, ate against the side of the stack.

He did not need the girl's warning shout. He turned, seeing three riders pressing toward them across the stubble of the field, and made a running mount as he snatched the reins from the girl's hand. Together they swung toward the south, angling away from their pursuers as a rifle sent its flat whang across the fire-laced night.

He twisted in his saddle, using his forty-five to throw five quick shots above the riders' heads, and was relieved to see them ease their pace. Judy was ahead of him, nearing the south edge of the field. Beyond was a strip of low brush, not sufficiently high to hide them, which ran down and lost itself in the sands of the sink below.

She wheeled, cutting eastward through the brush, and he realized that she was heading up the line of the ditch which led to the hot springs above. He followed. He had no choice. Behind him the stacks were blazing pyres, and the riders from the house had turned back, as if with some vague idea of combating the fires.

He shouted at her, but a good hundred yards now separated them and she apparently did not hear. They drove past the house beside the springs and into the canyon in which her father had been killed. Within the mouth of the canyon he spurred to her side, again shouting his warning.

"Sylvester. Ernie Sylvester."

She heard and curbed her racing mount, pulling up as he came to a stop abreast. For a full minute the quiet of the night was broken only by the blowing of their horses.

Then she said in a small voice, "Maybe I shouldn't have done it."

"Burn the stacks? It was a stroke of genius."

"I hate to destroy things." She was terribly serious. "I know what that hay means. It's winter feed. The cattle will starve."

He pulled to her side, reaching out and grasping her arm tightly. "It's the one thing that could stop Petry. He won't drive across the sink now; he can't afford to. He'll have to drive most of his stock to Elkhead and ship it. He won't have cattle to overrun North Mountain, to drive us from our range."

"But our cattle won't have feed either."

They stared at each other in the darkness. Vance Clark took a long breath.

"We wouldn't have had feed if Petry had held that hay. We're no worse off for this night's work than he is. Let's get out of here while we can."

He started forward, but she reached out and caught his reins. Her ears had heard sound from the canyon above before his did.

"Wait."

He heard it then, two horses coming fast from above them. He turned his head. Behind them the glow from the distant burning stacks turned the dark sky a kind of crimson. Above them he was certain that Ernie Sylvester and another rider were coming down, attracted by the light of the fires.

WORDLESSLY he swung his horse toward the canyon wall, seeking a way upward, a way of escape. The canyon side was very steep, thin brush covering the rock layer, which rose like an upthrust crust, cracked and fractured by long-forgotten volcanic action, to form a rocky ridge high above.

They might have climbed it on foot, but they had no chance on horseback, and both sensed it at once.

"Go on back down the canyon." The command in Clark's voice was plain. "Make enough noise so that they know someone is ahead of them. They won't shoot until they know who it is."

Judy was about to protest, but the words died in her throat. She swung her horse and sent it back down the trail, turning toward the hot springs. At once from the canyon above a high challenging shout rose up to fill the night, and the drum of horses' hoofs came on at a rising pace.

Vance Clark pulled his own mount sidewise, taking advantage of the deeper shadows along the canyon wall. He had no real cover, but

he was hoping that the oncoming men's full attention would be on the sounds of the girl's flight.

In a single motion he stepped from the saddle and jerked his rifle free, laying the barrel across his horse's back, as the riders came around the small turn above him and drove toward the flats.

"Hold up."

His challenge was clear across the night, cutting above the noise of the running mounts. Unconsciously the lead man hauled up, and the animal behind drove into the flank of the fore horse.

For an instant all was confusion, as the riders fought their mounts. Then Ernie Sylvester's high-pitched voice sent its answer.

"Who is it?"

"Clark. Keep your hands in sight or I'll shoot you out of that saddle."

There was a muffled curse, and a gun flashed. A bullet cut the brush a dozen feet above Vance's head. His rifle steadied on the flash, a little below him and to his right. He squeezed the trigger and heard the impact of the bullet even as the high, anguished yell welled up. The second rider drove his spurs into his horse and dived into the night, the sounds of his passage echoing down the canyon.

Clark quieted his horse with one hand on its neck, locked the reins about a bush, and stepped cautiously around it, holding the rifle ready. A horse shifted, over to his right. He paused until he caught a glimpse of the animal as it shied from the shadows into a small patch of moonlight. Then he saw that its saddle was empty.

He moved in, still cautiously, half expecting a trap. A groan reached him, guiding him back to the rocky trail, and he saw the dark huddled shape that he judged to be a man.

He paused. "All right. Get up."

His only answer was another groan. He risked a match then, and the flickering flame showed him the contours of Ernie Sylvester's white face.

Then, as the match died, he heard a horse coming up the trail, and heard someone call his name.

(To be continued in the next issue.)

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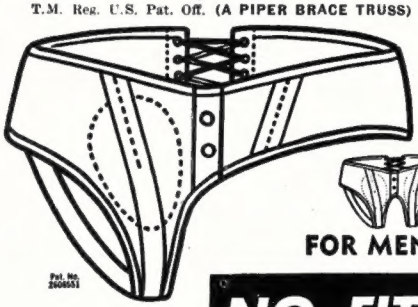

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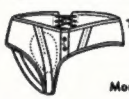

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